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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

FEB.

Fangs OF EMPIRE

A Complete Wayne Morgan Novel

By GUNNISON STEELE

THE CARDS RUN RED

A Watches Vidlak Novelet

By BEN FRANK

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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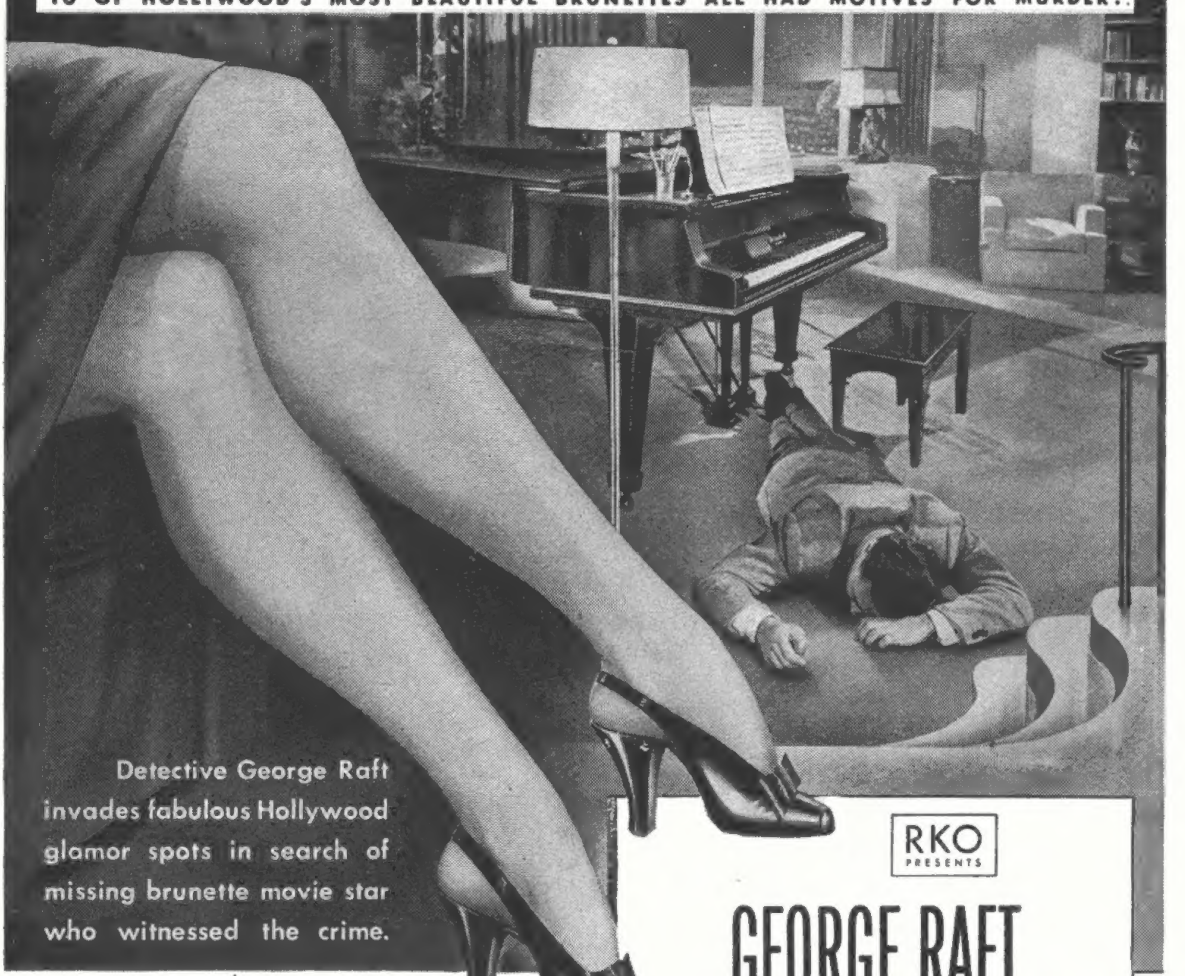

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Vol. XXI, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION FEBRUARY, 1947

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by Gunnison Steele

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RANGER FROM HELL *by Larry Harris* *59*

A surprise suddenly changes the plans of vengeance-seeking Pete Mayberry

PHEASANT HUNGRY *by L. P. Holmes* *85*

Sheriff Bosco gets busy when a pair of addled saddle pardners are framed

SORTA TOUGH ON THE CATTLE *by Stephen Payne* *94*

"The cows must go through," is Smith Clark's code, and he gets 'em through

AND

TRAIL TALK *by Foghorn Clancy* *6*

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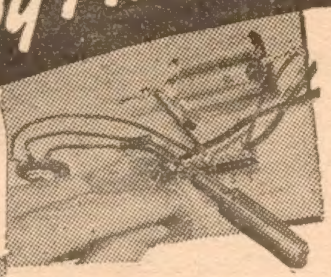

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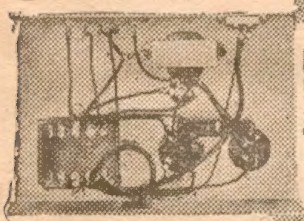

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HI WADDIES, grab yourself a handful of cayuse and we will be off on another trail ride and of course there will be some Trail Talk. We will head West as usual, this time to the land of the Little Big Horn, and the reason we are doing this is because of a fire, a fire that just a few months ago destroyed the officers' club at Fort Bliss, near El Paso, Texas.

In this fire the original painting of "Custer's Last Stand" was destroyed. The canvas was valued at $35,000. It depicted the blond-haired general, his long curls waving about his shoulders, standing erect among his dying men and firing into the faces of the oncoming Indians. At one side is a warrior, partly kneeling, aiming his rifle directly at Custer.

The Vow of Vengeance

Rain-in-the-Face is tomahawking a cavalry officer, presumably Capt. Tom Custer, the general's brother. Tom Custer had seized Rain-in-the-Face a year previously at Fort Yates, Dakota, and lodged him in jail for murdering two whites. The Redskin escaped, vowing vengeance.

Fifteen years later Rain-in-the-Face, then touring with Buffalo Bill's wild west show, told a reporter in New York that he slew Tom Custer and cut his heart out. Whether the story was inspired by a press agent for the show may never be known.

Destruction of the famous painting, copies of which are to be found all over the world, recalls charges made years ago that the painting was untrue to life. There was strong evidence that Custer was not wearing his hair long at the battle of the Little Big Horn. He went to Washington to participate in a red hot dispute a few weeks before the battle and it is asserted that he had a barber cut his hair before he went.

No Survivors

While the painting is in ashes, it was true to history in at least one particular. It depicted the Sioux wiping out Custer's band. Not a man survived.

Whether or not the painting was true to life or not, Custer's Last Stand, the wiping out of his heroic band, was the worst appalling holocaust that ever occurred on the plains. An event so disastrous that time, infinite though it be, can never make generations forget the tale of how Custer and his men gave up their lives while fighting in the desolate country drained by the Little Big Horn.

There are many circumstances connected with this terrible battle--primarily the causes leading thereto—which must be left to those who write and those who read, and there will always be differences of opinion on the battle as well as to the things that led up to it, and as for the details of the battle itself, they of course are lacking as there were no survivors. Many of the facts connected with the battle are lost forever, as the Indians who participated in the slaughter could hardly be relied on to tell the whole truth concerning it.

The Unbeatable Sioux

The Sioux Indians were regarded as the most formidable of the Northern tribes. At one time their power was so great that they might have contested successfully with all

(Continued on page 8)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

the other tribes west of the Mississippi combined, and in addition to their superior numbers they were altogether better soldiers, brave, athletic and of marvelous endurance.

When the Black Hills gold fever first broke out, in 1874, a rush of miners into that country resulted in much trouble, as the Indians always regarded that region with jealous interest, and resisted all encroachments of white men. Instead of the government adhering to the treaty of 1868 and restraining the white men from going into the Hills, Gen. Custer was sent out, in 1874, to intimidate the Sioux.

Probably no one can say truthfully that General Custer agreed with the spirit of the order, but he was a soldier under orders, and as such he had to carry out the orders of those in authority. While most any American will show his pride in the courage of the soldiers of that day, there are few if any who will point with pride to the treatment received by the Indians from the Great White Father in Washington.

General Custer's March

It is claimed by some that the trip made to Washington and the red hot dispute referred to was a protest against the government's policy with the Indians, but it seems that the authorities in the capital had their way and Custer with his men proceeded to Prospect Valley, and from there he pushed on to the valley of the Little Missouri.

Custer expected to find good grazing ground in this valley, suitable for a camp which he intended to pitch there for several days, and reconnoiter, but the country was comparatively barren and the march was therefore continued to the Belle Fourche valley, where excellent grazing, water, and plenty of wood was found.

Crossing the Fourche the expedition was now among the outlying ranges of the Hills, where a camp was made and some reconnoitering done, but finding no Indians, Gen. Custer continued his march, skirting the Black Hills and passing through a country which he described as beautiful beyond description, abounding with a most luxurious vegetation, cool, crystal streams, a profusion of gaudy, sweet flowers, and plenty of game.

The Abandoned Camp Fire

Proceeding down this lovely valley, which he appropriately named Floral Park, an Indian camp fire, recently abandoned, was discovered, and fearing conflict unless pains

(Continued on page 103)

IMAGINE THEIR JOY

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HERB HALL! WHY, DAD, HE'S THE MOVIE ARCHER!
DISCOVERED BENEATH MY BACKWOOD'S BEARD, AND AREN'T YOU PAUL LAURIE, THE FAMOUS HUNTER?
THANKS FOR THE LIFT WITH THAT BUCK. MAY I DRIVE YOU TO YOUR CAMP?
FINE! AND SAY . . . IT'S NEAR DINNER TIME. WHY NOT JOIN US?
I'D LIKE TO SHAVE BEFORE WE EAT BUT HAVEN'T A RAZOR IN MY CAR
COME ALONG AND USE MINE
THIS IS THE BLADE FOR ME! SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE EVER HAD
LOTS OF MY FRIENDS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE MIGHTY EASY ON YOUR FACE
SO NEXT WEEK WE HOP TO ALASKA FOR GIANT MOOSE. LIKE TO COME ALONG?
WOULD I! AND HOW!
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YOU LOOK AND FEEL RIGHT ON THE BEAM WHEN YOU SHAVE WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE SHARPEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. WHAT'S MORE . . . AND THIS IS IMPORTANT . . . THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PERFECTLY, PROTECTING YOU FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES AND FAULTY SHAVING METHODS. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
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Wayne Morgan leaped at the dangerous killer (CHAP. X)

FANGS OF EMPIRE

By GUNNISON STEELE

When mysterious death stalks the cattle ranges of Big Misty Basin, Wayne Morgan comes a-ridin' ready to match gun and fist with a crew of desperate killers and evil renegades!

CHAPTER I

Death on the Trail

DAVE SHANNON, riding slowly along the trail that wound through a rough section of Big Misty Basin from the town of Roaring Horse to his big Crescent outfit, was low in spirit. He was getting old, and he was lonely, and remorse was a dark weight inside him.

He was alone in the world now, and had been for over ten years—ever since a bitter quarrel with his wildling son, Craig Shannon, had driven the boy from the basin. The cause of the quarrel was hazy in his mind now. It didn't matter. What did matter was that his son had gone away in a wild rage, swearing never to return so long as his father lived. And young

A Complete Full-Length Masked Rider Novel

Craig Shannon had kept that vow. He had not, in fact, even written.

The weight of that old quarrel lay heavy on the wiry, gray-bearded rancher. It had stooped his thin shoulders and seamed his stern face. The responsibility, he now admitted, was his.

Lost in his dreary thoughts, he did not sense the presence of the man crouched there on the cutbank above the trail. But the crouched man was avidly aware of old Dave Shannon—had, in fact, been waiting there for him for some time. There was a gun in his hand, and his eyes were cold, merciless, as he watched the oncoming rider.

His voice, when he spoke, was low and sibilant, like the hiss of a snake.

"Pull up, Shannon! And yuh'd better not make a crooked move!"

Although the rancher's mind was far away, he sensed the stark menace in that voice. He jerked his dun to a halt, and lifted puzzled eyes, not able immediately to locate the spot where the voice had come from.

"Get off yore hoss, Shannon," the deadly voice ordered. "And come up here!"

Shannon peered upward at the rim of the cutbank. The late sun was in his eyes, but jutting over the rim he could see the barrel of a six-shooter, and behind the gun a shadowy figure. The salty oldster's hand inched toward his own gun.

"Yuh fool," the voice snarled, "do yuh want to die?"

"No, don't reckon I do," Shannon admitted, and moved his hand carefully back to the saddle-horn. "But you're the fool, hombre, if yuh're meanin' this for a holdup. I've got no money on me."

"Do like I said!" ordered the man behind the gun. "Get off yore hoss and climb up here."

SHANNON slowly dismounted. His senses were sharply alert now, his wildling son for the moment forgotten. That voice was oddly familiar, though there seemed something strange about it, too—oddly familiar, something different. And there was something queer about the order to climb to the rim of the cutbank.

Nevertheless, he started clambering slowly up the shaly slope. The cold eyes of the man behind the gun watched him warily. Then, as Shannon reached the rim, the gunman took two backward steps.

Shannon straightened, staring straight at the man with the gun. Naked amazement leaped into his pale eyes. He should have recognized the voice.

"Why—why—" he stammered. "What'n all perdition yuh mean by this? Wouldn't surprise me none if it was some other hombres in this basin I could name. But you—"

He broke off, trying desperately to dodge the gun-barrel that the holdup man swung suddenly and savagely at his head. But the gun-barrel struck solidly, just behind his left ear. Shannon staggered backward, tripped, tumbled headlong down the decline.

He landed at the edge of the trail, and rolled, stopping almost under the feet of his dun mount. The dun snorted, wheeled, and galloped wildly along the trail. Dave Shannon lay still, a trickle of blood running over one side of his bearded face.

The killer clambered slowly down onto the trail, eyes wary and cruel, the gun still in hand. He stooped over the still figure. For a moment he knelt there, his hands fumbling over Dave Shannon's body. Then he straightened, almost panicky haste in his movements now, and clambered back to the rim of the cutbank.

A moment later there was a clatter of hoofs as he rode away from the spot. Dave Shannon was still as the earth on which he lay, there on the trail. . . .

It was just at sunset when a Crescent puncher, Pete Barnes, homeward bound, found the body there at the edge of the trail. Shannon was stone-dead.

The puncher managed to catch Shannon's dun, and lashed the body to the saddle. If he hadn't been so excited, maybe he would have summoned Dr. Caleb Lee from Roaring Horse before touching the body, or at least headed for town with it. As it was, he headed for the Crescent with his dead boss, arriving there well after dark.

His shout brought several punchers

from the bunkhouse. At their head was wiry, bandy-legged old "Jubilee" Boone, the Crescent foreman. He had been with Dave Shannon for over a quarter of a century.

"Who yuh got there, Pete?" Jubilee demanded.

"Got the b-boss," Pete stuttered. "Found him layin' in the trail. I think he's dead!"

Consternation slammed at the punchers. They crowded about the two horses, firing questions at Pete. But he could tell them nothing beyond the bare fact that he had found the oldster lying sprawled beside the trail, apparently dead.

"I'll tear apart the murderin' skunk that done it!" a waddy spat. "Never was a squarer hombre than Dave Shannon."

"Take it slow," old Jubilee advised. "We don't know yet he was beefed. Mebbe his horse throwed him. Pete, yuh should have fogged into town and brought Doc Lee to have a look-see before the body was moved."

"Reckon I was too plumb excited," Pete admitted.

"Can't be helped now," Jubilee said soberly. "Lay hold, a couple you rannies, and take him inside."

Gently they lifted Dave Shannon from the saddle, took him into the rambling old ranchhouse, and placed him on a bed. In the murky lamplight the faces of the punchers were grim-set. Their eyes, especially those of walrus-mustached old Jubilee Boone, were shadowy with grief.

"Big gash on his head," a rider muttered. "Looks like a gun-barrel done it. Reckon that's about right, too."

WAYNE MORGAN

"We'll let Doc Lee decide," Jubilee said. "Be best to have him come out here. Red. You go get him."

A red-haired puncher turned and left the room. . . .

Within two hours there was a clatter of buckboard wheels in the night outside. The vehicle drew to a halt before the ranchhouse, steps were heard on the porch, and Dr. Caleb Lee bustled into the

room carrying his black satchel.

"Doc" Lee was well-known and well-liked all over the basin. He was a middle-aged man, stocky of body, and with square, good-natured features. Pale eyes peered from behind thick-lensed spectacles. The paunchy doctor had been a long-time friend of old Dave Shannon.

WITHOUT speaking to the silent ranch hands, he strode to the bed and stooped over the still figure which lay there. His examination was brief, but thorough. Then he turned, peering at the men in the room.

"Who found the body, and where?" he asked gently.

Pete Barnes the tow-headed puncher, stepped forward.

"I found him," he said. "Over close to Wolf Creek, where the trail dips between two cutbanks. Layin' beside the trail. I brung him home."

"Shouldn't have moved him," said Doc. "Not that it matters, I suppose, although Sheriff Sam Crews will probably raise a howl. I tried to get hold of him before I started out here, but he was out of town. When he gets back he'll want to make an investigation. Not that it's necessary. It seems pretty clear what happened."

"Yuh're the coroner, Doc," old Jubilee said grimly. "What caused Dave to die? That place on his head looks like it was made by a pistol barrel."

"It could have been, of course," Doc Lee said slowly. "But it also could have been caused by several other things. Such as tumbling down one of those cutbanks onto the trail. Or his head striking against a rock when his horse threw him. It doesn't matter so much. Because that blow, whatever it was, was not sufficient to have caused his death."

Murmurs of surprise filtered through the room.

"If that lick didn't kill 'im, then what in tunket did?" Jubilee demanded.

"Dave Shannon," Doc Lee said slowly, "died from rattlesnake bite!"

"Rattlesnake bite! You loco, Doc? I don't see any sign of any."

"Look!"

Doc Lee had slit the dead man's right trouser leg, and now the punchers stared with bulging eyes at the rancher's leg. The limb was badly swollen. The swelling was worse just above the knee, where the staring punchers could see two tiny, purplish-red dots side by side.

There were many rattlers in Big Misty Basin. And, at one time or another, most of the punchers had seen men who had been bitten by the deadly reptiles. Here, beyond doubt, was snake bite.

"That's what killed Dave, not the blow on the head," Doc Lee said solemnly.

"Reckon yuh're right," Jubilee admitted grimly. "But what was he doin' off his horse? Cussed rattler wouldn't jump up and bite a man."

Doc shook his head.

"Maybe something was wrong with his saddle and he'd got off to fix it. But that's not for me to say. All I can say is that he was bitten by a rattlesnake. Perhaps more will come to light when an examination is made of the spot where he was found. The rest is up to the sheriff."

"That's two the danged rattlers have got lately," Pete said. "This city dude, Hartley, that was found last month over on the south part of Kemp Thor's place—he was bit in nearly the same place, just above the knee. Wasn't he?"

"That's correct," Doc Lee said. "Greenhorns like Hartley have no business prowling through the rough country. Claimed he was hunting, didn't he?"

"Dave Shannon wasn't a greenhorn," old Jubilee grunted. "He's practically bedded down with rattlers all his life."

"Must have got careless," said Doc, soberly. "Most men do, at one time or another. Unfortunately, when you get careless with a rattler it's usually the last time."

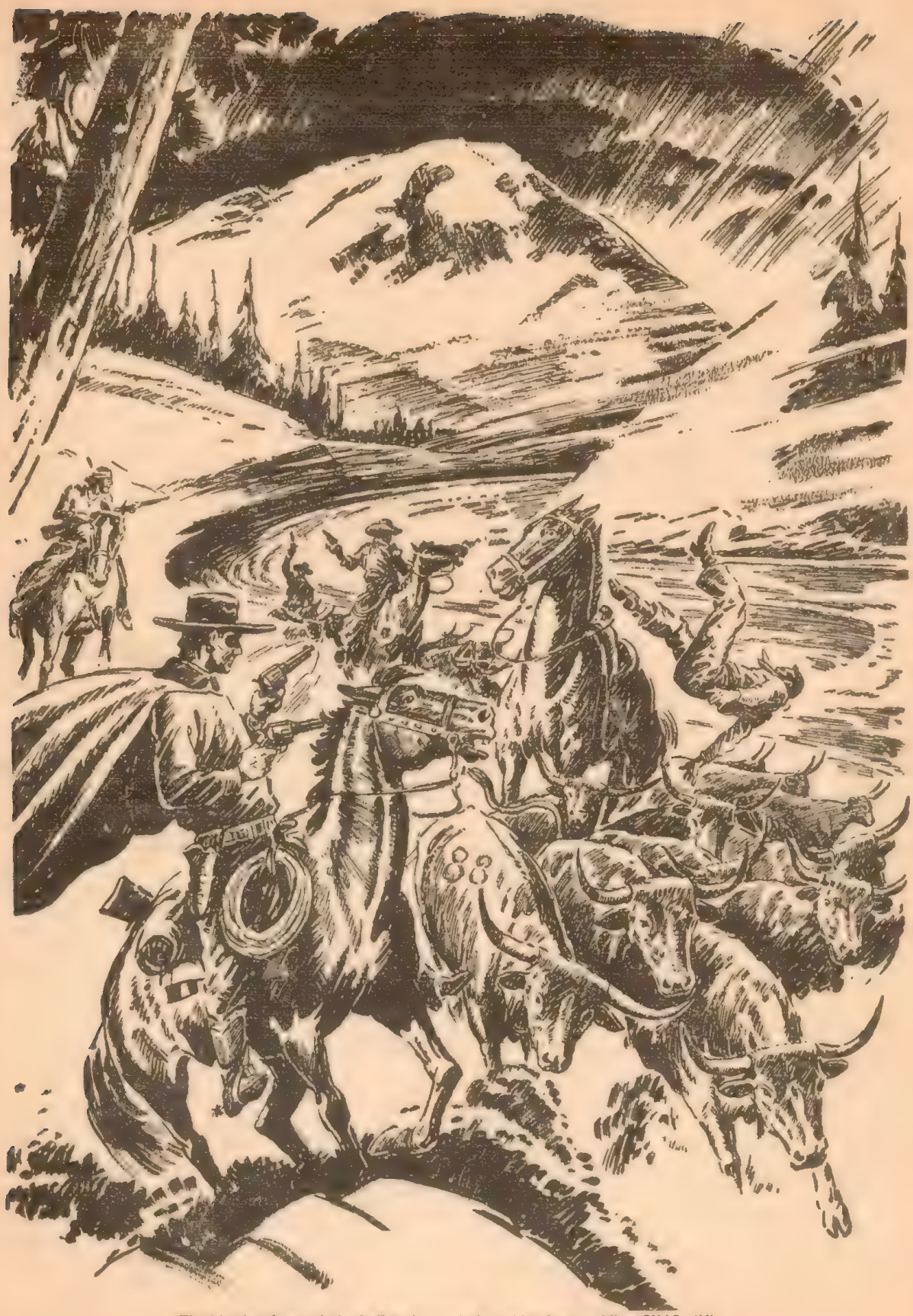
The punchers shifted about uncertainly. They seemed dazed, bewildered by the sudden death of the man most of them had come to look upon as a father. Gloom was thick in the room.

"Hadn't somebody ought to be notified?" one of them muttered.

"Who?" asked another. "Far as I know, Dave didn't have any close relatives."

"Except his boy, Craig," Jubilee muttered, frowning. "And he was just a kid when he left the basin ten years ago. Ain't never been back. Him and Dave—"

"They quarreled," Doc Lee said, as the oldster paused. "It's never been any secret in the basin. The boy was wild—maybe more than wild, although that's not



The blasting force of the bullet slammed the raider from saddle (CHAP. IV)

for me to say. I do know, however, that especially of late years old Dave bitterly regretted the quarrel that drove his boy away. He wanted Craig Shannon back home more than he wanted anything in the world. I also happen to know that in his will he left everything he owned to the boy."

"That's a fact," Jubilee agreed. "But don't nobody know where the young 'un is. Even Dave didn't know."

Doc Lee rubbed his square jaw thoughtfully.

"I never mentioned it to Dave," he said, "but I've heard rumors several times that Craig Shannon was in Texas, that he'd straightened up and was doing all right. I wanted Dave and his boy to work out their own problems. Now it's too late. Anyway, I'll try to find Craig. I suppose it's better to come home late than never to come at all."

For the first time Doc's professional mask dropped, and there was grief in his pale eyes as he looked at the dead man.

CHAPTER II

Shotgun Welcome

A THIN mist lay like a shifting gray shroud over most of the basin. It made the ragged gunshots which suddenly echoed through the darkness all the more sinister.

One of the two blanket-covered figures who lay beside a dying campfire stirred, cast aside his blankets, and sat up. He sat still as a stone, glossy head to one side, listening. The swift, staccato gunfire continued.

The man the shots had awakened got quickly to his feet.

He was an Indian, lithe, powerfully built, his magnificent copper body perfectly proportioned and muscular. He had been sleeping, but still wore his drill pants and white shirt, with a scarlet sash tied about his waist. Sheathed to the sash was a long-bladed, wicked-looking knife. His raven-black hair fell almost to his shoulders and was held in place by a crimson bandeau girding his head.

The Indian stepped quickly to the other blanket-covered figure, touched the man's shoulder gently with his hand.

"Senor!" he said huskily, calling his companion by the only name he had ever used for him during their years of riding the danger trails together.

The man in the blankets stirred.

"I'm not asleep, Blue Hawk," he said instantly. "I heard the shots."

He flung aside his blankets, got to his feet, strapping about his lithe waist a pair of black-butted six-shooters as he rose. In many parts of the far-flung West where he had rode, he was known as Wayne Morgan, and was a tall, powerful, blue-eyed man. He wore ordinary levis, and a gray shirt that was open at his muscular throat. His features were rugged and brown, and his wide lips were always ready to grin good-naturedly. Though they could become grim enough when occasion demanded.

The campfire had been built beside a small stream, at the base of towering red cliffs. Bed-rolls and other gear were scattered about the little clearing. In a small meadow nearby were picketed four horses—a pinto, a gray, a hammer-headed roan, and a magnificent black stallion.

This Wayne Morgan and his companion, Blue Hawk, a Yaqui Indian, were inseparable. They had much in common, not the least of which was that both were indomitable, fearless fighters. Wayne Morgan was fast and deadly with the twin Colts he wore; Blue Hawk was equally dangerous with the rifle he carried in a saddle scabbard, or with the keen-bladed knife in his sash.

Between these two was a deep bond of loyalty and affection. It was a bond that had been welded to steel-like hardness in the raging fires of uncounted battles for right and justice.

"The shots have stopped, Senor," Blue Hawk said, after a moment more of listening.

"Only a flurry," Morgan said. "But it didn't sound to me like a bunch of rannies lettin' off steam."

"You think it means trouble, then?" asked the Yaqui.

"Trouble — for somebody." Morgan stared intently off to the south, as if trying to pierce the clammy mist with his keen, alert blue eyes. "Where would yuh say them shots came from, Hawk?"

"About a mile away, Senor." The

Yaqui's clear-cut accent was noticeable, for he had been educated in a mission school, and spoke almost perfect English. "From close to the ranch buildings we saw off there when we made camp at sunset, I would say."

"My idea exactly," Morgan went on to say. "It wasn't a big outfit we noticed, but it looked well cared-for. Usually, a well-run ranch means honest folks. And gunshots on the ranch of honest folks at midnight could mean only one thing. Trouble!"

The Yaqui's black eyes gleamed with anticipation.

"We investigate, then?" he asked softly.

"Yes!" Morgan's voice was suddenly clipped, cold. "That's why we're here, why we rode over two hundred miles—to look into rumors of trouble in this valley. Now it starts on the first night we head into the basin! Bring the hosses, Hawk!"

"Yes, Senor!"

Blue Hawk wheeled, leaped like a dusky panther out of the circle of dim firelight, and ran toward the nearby meadow where the horses were picketed.

Hastily Wayne Morgan undid his bedroll and took from it a long, flowing black cloak, which he draped over his powerful shoulders. Over his eyes he fastened a black domino mask. A black sombrero, and the pair of black-handled six-shooters, completed his garb.

WITHIN the space of seconds, Wayne Morgan, drifting cowboy and top-hand, had become the mysterious, black-garbed Masked Rider! The famous Robin Hood outlaw of the danger trails, whose reckless courage and blazing guns had aided the oppressed and downtrodden over all the West.

Wherever the wicked threatened the righteous, wherever free and honest men were threatened with bondage or death, there the dashing, reckless Masked Rider and his Yaqui companion were apt to appear suddenly and unexpectedly.

No other man in all the West was more beloved by some, more bitterly hated by others. Scores of conflicting stories were told about him. Some called him a saint because, without desire for thanks or reward, he had saved their property, their very lives. Others regarded him as a devil, a lawless renegade who killed and robbed without conscience. There was a fortune in bounty on his head.

No man alive, however, except Blue Hawk, knew that the Masked Rider and the drifting cowboy, Wayne Morgan, were the same man. Not even the Yaqui knew the Masked Rider's real name, though, nor why he dedicated his life to the cause of right and justice throughout the West.

All the Yaqui knew was that, although always speaking in the drawling idiom of the West, which he loved, the Masked Rider was a well-educated man. Blue Hawk also knew that the black-clad rider bore a bitter, implacable hatred for wickedness and injustice. Beyond that he never spoke of his past.

And that was enough for Blue Hawk, for the Yaqui was a kindred soul. He asked no more than to ride at the daring Masked Rider's side into whatever perils their crusades carried them.

Almost before the Masked Rider had donned his garb, Blue Hawk led two saddled horses into the firelight. One of them was the wiry gray, the other the powerful, long-legged black stallion who was called Midnight.

The Masked Rider leaped into the saddle of the stallion, and the black reared and pranced with expectation, knowing that whenever he was mounted by the daredevil masked figure excitement invariably was close.

Blue Hawk leaped atop the gray. With a quick thunder of hoofs they raced away from the camp site.

They threaded their way through a narrow break in the red walls, then plunged into a belt of timber, with low limbs slashing and mauling at them. But they rode swiftly through the timber, then were pounding across open prairie.

They had heard no more gunshots in the night. The mist-shrouded basin seemed incredibly quiet, except for the rushing drum of their horses' hoofs. The wind blew in irregular gusts, shifting the mist like a swaying curtain. And at times they rode across spaces where the moon shone with startling brightness through rifts in the fog.

Even where the mist was thickest the night was not black. The moon, shining through the mist, gave out a weird, ghostly gray half-light.

For the last several days Wayne Morgan

and Blue Hawk had been riding toward this fertile Big Misty Basin, drawn by rumors of trouble, as Morgan had said. Thievery and murder, these rumors said, were rampant in the basin. And now these reports were easy to believe. Even though the Masked Rider had not seen anything amiss, and had not heard anything more sinister than gunshots in the night, he was convinced that evil was afoot.

They drove straight for the ranch buildings they had seen just before making camp at sunset that afternoon. The huge stallion was out in front, running with mighty, effortless bounds, its rider's black cape billowing out behind him. The Yaqui's gray was close behind.

Midnight swerved suddenly, avoiding a pole corral, and the ranch buildings rushed at them out of the mist. There were no lights in any of the structures, nor was there a sign of movement anywhere, and no sound at all.

Instantly wary, the Masked Rider guided the stallion to the shelter of a barn wall, nearby, followed by Blue Hawk. They sat there motionless in saddles, in the deep shadows, straining their eyes and ears.

A horse kicked the side of a stable inside the barn. A loose board creaked in the wind somewhere. Otherwise, there was absolutely no sound.

The log ranchhouse was as dark as the other buildings. Utter silence held the place as did the mist, in its clammy grasp. Yet the Masked Rider had a feeling that the spread was not deserted. The very silence seemed weighted with something furtive and threatening.

"What yuh make of it, Hawk?" the masked man whispered.

The Yaqui shrugged.

"Maybe things are what they seem, Senor, maybe not. The shots came from near here. Of that I am sure."

"And men don't shoot, especially on a night like this, just to make a racket," agreed the Masked Rider. "Still, I'm not shore everything here's as peaceful as it seems."

HE TRIED to shake off the feeling that unseen eyes were staring at him from somewhere among the buildings. But the creepy feeling persisted.

The Masked Rider had ridden the danger trails too long, with possible death the price of relaxed vigilance, to ignore his hunches. The silence, the appearance of desertion, struck a false note which he did not intend to ignore now.

Suddenly he swung to the ground, handed the stallion's reins to the Indian.

"Wait here, Hawk," he whispered. "I aim to have a look-see. If anybody's at home, I'll rouse 'em!"

The Yaqui nodded, but said nothing. He never questioned the Masked Rider's orders. And the Masked Rider knew that always he could trust Blue Hawk to guard his back vigilantly.

Without hesitation, the Robin Hood outlaw crossed the open space between the barn and ranchhouse. He crossed a narrow porch and paused before a closed door. Sharply he rapped on the panels with his knuckles. As he stood there a moment before repeating the knock, that feeling of unseen peril was intensified.

The board still creaked in the wind, but there was no other sound, inside or outside the house. Ropy tendrils of mist curled about the black-garbed figure on the porch.

When silence persisted after his third knock on the door, he grasped the knob, turned it. The unlocked door gave inward to his pressure. He stood there an instant in the opening, before murky light from the match in his hand flared up.

Then abruptly the Masked Rider hurled his powerful body through the doorway in a cougarlike leap. A blasting roar rocked his ear drums, and twin funnels of flame spewed over his left shoulder, searing his face and neck. Acrid smoke bit at his nostrils.

Those twin fangs of flame, he knew, had come from the muzzles of a double-barreled shotgun!

His shoulder crashed into a lithe figure inside the house. The figure writhed away, slashing savagely downward with the shotgun barrel. The Masked Rider twisted aside, feeling the wind from the gun-barrel on his face, heard its wicked thud as it smacked against the floor.

He flung his arms about his antagonist's legs, heaved upward. The body slammed hard against the floor. The masked man bored in relentlessly, sinewy fingers snaking upward to fasten themselves about

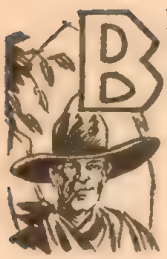
his adversary's throat.

Then his lean body stiffened. Slowly his fingers fell away from the throat of the shotgun wielder. The body there on the floor lay still. With a growing conviction in his mind, the Masked Rider rolled aside, fumbling for another match.

The match flared, lighting the narrow hallway murkily. Stunned, the Masked Rider stared down at the figure on the floor. It was that of a girl—a remarkably pretty girl, red-headed and slim-bodied, dressed in levis, shirt and leather jacket!

CHAPTER III

Trouble Trail



BLOOD trickled slowly from a shallow gash on the girl's forehead. Evidently it had been inflicted when her head struck the floor. It showed darkly against the pallor of her face.

The double-barreled shotgun lay on the floor beside her, smoke still curling from its muzzles. Gingerly the masked man shoved the murderous weapon aside with his toe.

A light footstep sounded on the porch, and the Masked Rider whirled, guns in hand. But it was only Blue Hawk.

"Are you all right, Senor?" the Yaqui demanded anxiously. "The shot I heard—I wondered."

"I'm all right, Hawk," the masked man assured him. "It's a girl who's hurt, so far. But somethin's bad wrong here. You wait outside and cover me. I'll call if I need yuh."

"Yes, Senor," Blue Hawk murmured, and faded back into the deeper shadows.

The match winked out. But through an open doorway, the Masked Rider had glimpsed a white bed. Gently he lifted the girl in his arms, groped his way through the shadows, and placed her on the white counterpane. Obviously she was only stunned, for her breathing was regular.

He scratched another match, applied it to a kerosene lamp on a table beside

The slab-bodied man leaped forward, jamming the fork of the stick just behind the head of the snake (CHAP. VII)

the bed. His cold, alert eyes raked the room. It was evidently the girl's bedroom—white, neat, clean. It was connected with an adjoining room with a door, which stood open. Quilts had been draped over the two windows.

The Robin Hood outlaw's lips tightened. A dark ranchhouse, its windows shuttered or blanketed, a desperate young girl crouching alone in the darkness with a loaded shotgun in her hands!

Suddenly the Masked Rider tensed, whirled about, and again the black guns appeared in his hands with incredible speed. A low moan, freighted with pain, had come from the adjoining room!

He stood for a moment peering into the shadowy room. But he could see nothing. The moan came again. Then, the lamp in one hand, the black-garbed man catfooted through the doorway. He stopped just inside the doorway, staring warily.

A wiry man with a gray mustache, his thin features drawn and harsh with pain, lay on a tumbled bed. Except for his shirt which had been removed, the man was fully dressed. A red-stained bandage was plastered over one shoulder. He was trying desperately to get to his feet, a grimace of hatred pulling at his lips.

"Cuss yuh!" he croaked harshly. "Where's Jan? Where's my girl? I heard a shot! Where's my gun?"

"Easy, *amigo*," the Masked Rider said gently. "Yore girl's all right and you won't need a gun."

Hearing a noise behind him, the masked man turned and quickly went back into the room he had just left. The red-haired girl was sitting erect on the bed, staring about the room as though bewildered. Gradually remembrance showed in her eyes as she stared at the Masked Rider.

"You—you murderer!" she flung at him. "What have you done to my father?"

The Masked Rider holstered his gun.

"Seems like your father's been shot, but I didn't do it. Look, girl—I don't aim to hurt yuh. What's happened here?"

Without answering, the girl leaped from the bed and darted into the adjoining room. The black-clad man followed quickly with the lamp. There was a chance that she might have another shotgun cached there.

But she was on her knees, gazing anxiously at her father, who glared with truculent fury up at the Masked Rider.

"Wasn't satisfied with stealin' the last of my critters, huh?" he growled bitterly. "Decided to come back and finish yore work! Well, why don't yuh finish it?"

"I haven't got any work to finish—at least not the way you mean," the tall man said quietly. "I'm the Masked Rider!"

Both father and daughter stared at him, with first puzzlement, and then gradual belief coming into their eyes. It was plain enough that they had heard of the Masked Rider, if they had never before seen him.

"The Masked Rider!" whispered the wounded man. "By gosh, I reckon yuh are, at that!"

"You mean you weren't with the raiders who drove off our herd and shot Dad a little while ago?" the girl asked swiftly.

"That's right! Now tell me what happened."

"First, let's get acquainted, Masked Rider," said the man on the bed. "I'm Kemp Thor—and this is my daughter, Jan. This little Eighty-eight outfit belongs to me."

THE masked man acknowledged the introductions with a curt nod. Jan Thor, he saw, was no more than eighteen, and even prettier than he had thought at first sight of her. But his appreciation of her beauty would have to wait. For now that he knew evil was abroad in the night, impatience rode him hard.

"Now, what happened?" he asked again.

Kemp Thor swore thinly, futilely.

"The polecats drove off a hundred head of prime stuff," he finally said. "Nearly the last critter I had left on the place!"

"Who did?" snapped the masked man impatiently.

"That's just what I don't know!" growled Thor. "The same ones that've been raisin' Cain in general for the last several months, I reckon. They've stole me blind. Not that I'm the only one that's lost, though I've been hit harder than anybody else. Twice, too, before tonight, somebody's tried to drygulch me."

The Masked Rider nodded, almost wearily. This was an old pattern, seen by him many times before. Always the same, differing only in small details, it was the endless fight between honesty and

greed and evil.

"I'm about licked here," Kemp Thor went on dejectedly. "For myself, I could stand it. But the women— Matters got so bad I sent my wife, Jan's mother—she ain't so well—to visit her folks in Tucson two weeks ago. Jan insisted on stayin' here to help me. Well, I needed help. The last two-three days we've been roundin' up what cattle we had left, aimin' to drive 'em to the loadin' chutes in Roarin' Hoss where there's a buyer waitin'. Finished the roundup today—or I reckon it's yesterday, now. Had the critters in a little pasture a quarter-mile over yonder, aimin' to start the drive at dawn.

"I was afraid somethin' might happen, so I was standin' night guard over the herd. A little while ago four-five riders suddenly showed up out of the mist and opened up on me without warnin'. I got in a few shots, but a bullet knocked me out of the saddle. The snakes drove off the herd, leavin' me there on the ground for dead. Jan heard the shots and come on the run. She managed to get me back into the saddle and to the house, where she patched me up just about the best way she could."

"I thought maybe the raiders would come back to kill us both," Jan Thor took up the story. "That's why I was waiting there in the hall with the shotgun. I'm sorry I almost killed you, Masked Rider. I thought you were one of—them."

"Forget it!" clipped the masked man. "Yuh shore, Thor, yuh didn't recognize any of the raiders?"

"It all happened quick, and besides I couldn't see good in the mist. But there might be one clue. One of the raiders—he seemed to be the leader—rode a blazed-face hoss with three white-stockinged feet."

"Dad!" the girl said sharply. "You didn't mention that before!"

"Didn't have time," Thor muttered.

"What kind of clue is that?" the Masked Rider asked quickly. "Yuh know somebody who owns a hoss like that?"

"Anybody might own a horse with white-stockinged feet," Jan said swiftly. "It doesn't mean anything!"

The Robin Hood outlaw looked at Jan Thor shrewdly. Her face was taut, pale, her eyes defiant. She was, he saw, highly agitated.

"Who owns that kind of hoss?" he asked grimly.

"Young hombre by the name of Cort Lash," Kemp Thor said, with seeming reluctance. "He owns an outfit over north apiece on the edge of the hills. So far as I know, he's the only man in the whole basin who does own a mount like it."

"Is this Cort Lash supposed to be honest?" asked the black-clad man.

"That's a matter of opinion." Kemp Thor shrugged. "Cort's father was old Black Sam Lash, an outlaw and a hoss thief. Black Sam Lash was strung up by a ranchers' posse ten years ago for rustlin', when Cort was just a button. Folks swore that Cort had his pa's black blood in him, that he was bound to be snaky like his pap. Me, I don't know."

"There's no proof Cort Lash is anything but square and honest," Jan Thor said fiercely. "Folks shun him, and lie about him, because his father was a rustler. But that doesn't make Cort one. I think he's—"

Her voice gradually died away. Her eyes were flashing, her face flushed. This girl, the Masked Rider had already decided, was in love with Cort Lash, the outlaw's son.

KEMP THOR was looking at his daughter curiously.

"Yuh got no call to defend him, girl," he muttered. "I'm just tellin' what I saw tonight. One of the raiders was forkin' a hoss like Cort Lash's white-stockinged bay. You know well enough there's been talk he's behind all the cussedness that's been goin' on in the basin."

"There's been talk about others, too!" Jan flared. "Bill Quady, for instance. What about him?"

"Who and what is Bill Quady?" the Masked Rider demanded.

"Quady owns the Cross T outfit," the wounded rancher explained. "He's an unsociable cuss, a hard drinker and gambler. Fights a lot. Bill Quady's been accused of a lot of things, but nothin's ever been proved. I don't know about Quady, either. Talk, but that's all I know."

The Masked Rider was quiet a moment, his keen, analytical mind placing in its proper place what he had just heard. Maybe he had something concrete to go on; maybe not. Only time would tell.

But admittedly not many horses such as Thor had described would be found in one locality.

"When did all this start?" he asked.

"Five-six months ago," Kemp Thor told him. "Just a little while after old Dave Shannon died and his boy, Craig Shannon, came back to take charge of the Crescent outfit. Dave was bit by a rattler on the trail between his place and town. Dead when one of his punchers found him. Dave left everything to his boy, Craig. The young 'un had been gone for ten years, ever since him and his pa had a quarrel over the boy's wildness. Doc Lee found the button—only he's about twenty-eight now—in Texas."

"Yuh say Dave Shannon and his son had quarreled because of the boy's wildness?" repeated the Masked Rider. "Is this Craig Shannon still wild?"

"I don't like him," Jan Thor declared, tossing her red head. "I wish he's stay away from here."

"Craig Shannon has took a shine to my girl!" The wounded man chuckled, then grimaced with pain. "Not that I blame him. Craig, so far as I can judge, is ace-high. Quick-tempered, mebbe, and a mite rough. But that's to be expected. If yuh mean, do I think he's got anything to do with what's been happenin'—I don't. He's well-fixed as it is. The Crescent is a big outfit."

"Looks queer, an old-timer like Dave Shannon gettin' bit by a rattler," the black-garbed man murmured, a skeptical look in his eyes.

"Yeah, it did," acknowledged the rancher. "But there's lots of rattlers in Big Misty. Hadn't been but a month before Dave Shannon died when one of the critters got another gent, fella named Hartley, right here on my range. Hartley was a kind of greenhorn. Been prowlin' about the hills for a couple weeks, campin' and huntin'. Claimed he was in bad health. Well, he shore was when they found him one day. A rattler had bit him and his leg was swelled big as a keg."

The Masked Rider had been sitting in a chair beside the bed. Now, impatient for action, he got to his feet.

"Reckon tonight's raid'll about finish yuh, won't it?" he asked casually.

"I'm licked," Kemp Thor said bitterly. "With the money from them hundred head I aimed to pay off the bank. Now I can't do it."

"Mebbe yuh can!" the masked man encouraged him. "Yuh know which way they drove the herd?"

"South, toward the hills, like they always do. Once they cross the river and get into the rough country beyond they're hard to trail. Likely they cross the hills and scatter down onto the Cold Creek range. What yuh aimin' to do, Masked Rider?""

The tall, black-clad man shrugged, *"Quien sabe?"* he murmured, turned, and went quickly into the night.

Blue Hawk was waiting for him with the horses, in the deep shadows of the barn wall, rifle in hand. He grunted with relief as the Masked Rider strode toward him.

"Work for us, Senor?" the Yaqui asked, as the Masked Rider swung into the saddle.

"Yes, Hawk!" the masked man said grimly. "Right now, we've got a stolen herd to get back—and that's only a beginnin'. I'll tell yuh about it as we ride."

Blue Hawk nodded, swung the gray in beside the Masked Rider as he whirled the great stallion and headed to the west, toward the nearby pasture where Kemp Thor had been holding the last of his cattle.

On the face of it, this was more than just a simple case of rustling. For to the masked man it was evident that a deliberate plot was afoot to ruin Kemp Thor, even kill him!

CHAPTER IV

Death in the Fog

THE mist had thinned somewhat, with the moon spearing its silvery shafts through the rifts, so the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had little trouble in locating the trail of the stolen herd as it straggled southward across the plain. They followed the trail, the Masked Rider explaining what he had learned to Blue Hawk as they rode.

"You think the Senor Cort Lash might be the rustler boss?" the Indian asked, as his companion finished.

"I'll not pass judgment till I see Lash—and the same goes for Bill Quady, too," declared the Robin Hood rider. "We know from experience, Hawk, that things ain't always what they seem. Honest men sometimes look like they're thieves—thieves seem to be honest men. But I do know that somethin' bad is happenin' here, and I aim to clear it up!"

The Yaqui nodded silent agreement. He knew that when the Masked Rider used that tone, somebody was in for trouble. And he knew that once the masked man had taken a trail he was as relentless as a wolf hound until its end was reached, until justice had been meted out to those he was fighting.

They followed the trail at a steady pace straight southward. At times it was plainly visible in the moonlight; at others, as the mist closed in, it was almost invisible. At times, as the fog lifted, they could see a ragged line of purple hills jutting against the southern horizon.

Four riders, they knew by now, were driving the stolen herd.

Miles slid under the thudding hoofs of the black and the gray. An hour passed—two hours. Obviously they were gaining on the slow-trailing herd.

Now dawn was close. Occasionally, they could see the rough, timbered slopes rising darkly before them.

Suddenly dawn was in the east. Gradually, as the wolf-gray light grew, the range of their vision increased. The chill, damp mist curled snakily about them.

"Look, Senor!" the Yaqui suddenly cried out. "The herd!"

Sure enough, there was the stolen herd, trailing slowly along through the fog two hundred yards ahead. There were, as the Masked Rider had known there would be, four raiders with the cattle. One rode point, one drag, the others were on the flanks. They had not as yet seen their pursuers.

The Masked Rider swerved Midnight, followed by Blue Hawk, and gained the shelter of a line of jack-pines. Just ahead of the herd, he saw, the mist became thicker, boiling upward as if churned by a strong wind—and even if he had not heard the muted roar of the water, he would have known that here was Roaring River which laced the basin and skirted the hills at this point. And once across the river, Kemp Thor had said, the chase would be hopeless.

The Masked Rider could see a break in the gleaming black walls ahead. He guessed that there must be a shallow ford here where the rustlers pushed their stolen cattle across.

He made a quick decision, as he always did. And, once committed to action, he never hesitated.

"We've got to hit 'em before they reach the river," he said swiftly to Blue Hawk. "I'll circle and come in at an angle. You come in from behind. Give me a little time."

"Yes, Senor! I will be ready."

Still keeping to the line of jack-pines, the Masked Rider spurred ahead. He could hear the unsuspecting raiders whooping, and slashing at the cattle with ropes, forcing them on toward the river.

The masked man almost passed the herd. Then, as the river blocked his path, he swerved the big stallion again and

[*Turn page*]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

rode suddenly out of the thicket.

The swing man, a burly, hawk-faced fellow, saw him first, and jerked his mount back on its haunches. He stared a moment, his mouth gaping, as if he thought he was looking at a black-clad demon of the fog that was bearing down upon him.

Then the swing man shouted a sudden, harsh warning to the others. From the right flank a lanky, buck-toothed raider spurred forward, hand on gun-butt. The other flank man—a swarthy, cruel-eyed breed—stared at the Masked Rider over the backs of the cattle. Momentarily, the drag man was hidden by the swirling fog.

When the masked man had approached to within a hundred feet, the burly swing man shouted a harsh warning:

"Just a minute, *amigo!* What's yore business here?"

"Watch it, Jake!" bawled the lanky rustler. "That's the Masked Rider, and he's plumb pizen!"

IGNORING the flat warning, the Masked Rider rode silently on, features grim, the blue eyes behind his domino mask bleak and implacable. This was an old game with him, matching speed and wits and cold nerve with the lawless—old, yet always new, luring him always to new adventures.

Ten yards from the blocky raider he halted. The rustler sat with his weight on his right leg, right hip forward, a calculating gleam in his evil eyes as he stared at the black-garbed rider. The lanky outlaw was still coming forward.

The Masked Rider gestured abruptly toward the cattle.

"Where yuh headed with that herd?" he demanded to know.

"That's our business," snarled the squat outlaw. "If yuh've got good sense, Masked Rider, yuh won't stick yore nose into our business."

"Them cattle are wearin' the Eighty-eight brand!" barked the black-clad man. "I'm Kemp Thor's friend. I'm takin' over the herd!"

"Yuh got gall, tryin' to rustle our herd right out from under our noses. Why, blast yuh, I got a good mind to salivate yuh!"

"Ride out—or grab yore gun!" the masked man said coldly.

The blocky raider cursed wickedly, grabbed for his gun.

A shot crashed above the low bawling of the cattle.

At ten yards, the blasting force of the .45 bullet slammed the raider from the saddle. His mount wheeled and galloped wildly away, stirrups flapping.

But the raider wasn't dead. He rolled over, reared to his knees, trying desperately to raise his gun. But he couldn't do it. He swayed there an instant, like a man praying, then fell slowly forward on his face.

Warned by a sudden pounding of hoofs, the Masked Rider whirled, twisting aside in his saddle. A gun roared almost in his face. The startled stallion reared, flailing the air with its front hoofs. The Masked Rider stared downward into the thin, ferretlike face of the lanky rider, a face from which glared a pair of yellowish, hate-filled eyes.

The raider swept on past him, dragged his mount to a halt, spun around and lifted his gun again. The gun spewed lead and flame, and the masked man felt the hot breath of the bullet as it snapped viciously past his ear.

Vaguely he was aware of the booming crash of a rifle somewhere behind him, and knew that Blue Hawk was in the fight. From the corner of his eye he saw the swarthy breed spurring his mount through the cattle, gun in hand. But the breed was still fifty yards away and the milling cattle were holding him back.

Now the masked man's attention was riveted on the lanky killer. He writhed desperately aside in his saddle, his twin guns flashing up, and their thunder echoed like drums among the walls.

The lanky man dropped his gun, clawed at his chest. With a snarl still curling his lips back from his buck-teeth, he tumbled stiffly to the ground.

Blue Hawk came racing up out of the fog from toward the drag, rifle upflung, anxiety on his coppery face. He had been delayed by the cattle, as well as by his short, savage battle with the drag man.

The Masked Rider whirled again, toward where he had last seen the breed. But the breed, seeing the fate of his companions, had quit cold. He was spurring wildly, frantically, back through the cattle. The masked man raised his black

guns, then lowered them. He couldn't shoot even a rustler and a killer in the back.

The breed reached the edge of the cattle, flinging a bitter look of fear over his shoulder, then vanished abruptly into the swirling fog.

"Shall I pursue him, Senor?" Blue Hawk asked eagerly.

"No, let him go. What about the drag man?"

"Dead, Senor."

"Then that makes three we got. What kind of hoss was he ridin'?"

"A buckskin. There was none with a blazed face and three white stockings."

"No." The masked man nodded. "That may mean nothin'. That hombre could have dropped out after makin' the raid."

"What now, Senor?" asked Blue Hawk.

"We'll trail this herd back to the Eighty-eight," the Masked Rider decided. "Afterward— Well, Kemp Thor won't be able to ride for some time, and the Thor girl will need help in gettin' these cattle to Roarin' Hoss. Wayne Morgan will have to help her do that."

"And after that?"

"There'll still be work to do. These hombres were likely only small fry carryin' out orders from their boss or bosses. We've got to find out who's givin' them orders. We'll bury these jaspers right here, then head back for the Eighty-eight."

IN NOT much more than half an hour they had the herd turned and headed back across the basin toward the Eighty-eight outfit. By now the mist was rapidly disappearing.

By midmorning it was gone. They drove the herd onto Kemp Thor's Eighty-eight outfit at midmorning and left the beefs in the same pasture from which they had been stolen the night before.

Jan Thor came galloping up on a spotted pony, before they could leave. She stared wonderingly at the cattle, and was almost tearful in her thanks.

"Better get 'em to a buyer as soon as possible," the Masked Rider advised, cutting short her thanks. "Best wait until tomorrow, though, for they need water and rest now. I don't think they'll be bothered again tonight."

"I—I'll do the best I can," said Jan. "Though it'll be a pretty big job, alone. Father won't be able to ride for several days, I'm afraid."

The masked man pretended deep thought.

"I aim to be busy on another job myself," he finally said. "But I know a gent who might help you—a driftin' cowboy named Wayne Morgan. I'll see if I can get in touch with him, and if I can I'll send him to yuh early tomorrow."

"If you only could!" Jan cried eagerly. "And I can't thank you enough!"

The Masked Rider lifted his hand in a parting salute, and he and Blue Hawk rode away. It was not a great while before they dismounted at their camp beside the little stream a mile north of the Eighty-eight Ranch buildings.

CHAPTER V

Lady Boss

WAYNE MORGAN, mounted on the powerful, hammer-headed roan, reached the Eighty-eight spread the next morning before sunup. He found Jan Thor already astir. The savory smell of coffee, bacon and eggs came from the house.

As Morgan called, Jan came out onto the porch and stood in the early morning chill. She regarded the big, smiling cowboy with calm, appraising eyes.

"Are you Wayne Morgan?" she asked, before he could speak.

"That's right, ma'am." He bowed, hat in hand. "Just a rollin' stone not wantin' to gather any moss. I heard yuh might have a job for me."

"That's right, I have," she told him. "Although it maybe won't last longer than just today."

"That's long enough on any one job, I'd say." His grin broadened. "I'm ready to roll any time yuh say.'"

The girl smiled suddenly, obviously favorably impressed with Morgan. She gestured with a small, tanned hand.

"I'll be ready to roll with you in just a few minutes," she said, "I was just starting to eat. Have you had breakfast?"

"Yeah, I have. But that coffee shore smells good."

"Get down, then. There's plenty."

Morgan dismounted and went inside with Jan Thor. He enjoyed the strong, black coffee, but his main reason for entering was to find out how Kemp Thor was progressing.

Jan introduced him to her father, but offered no explanation for his being wounded. The rancher's shoulder was obviously sore and stiff, but he looked remarkably fit, all things considered.

"Them cattle's mighty important to me, Morgan," Thor said bluntly, as Morgan and the girl prepared to leave, after they had talked for a while. "If the Masked Rider sent yuh here, he mebbe mentioned what happened night before last."

"He said somethin' about the herd bein' stole once," Morgan said casually. "The Masked Rider got it back, didn't he?"

"He shore did!" Thor said with enthusiasm. "I never did believe the yarns I heard about him bein' a crook and killer, and now I know they was lies! He's a friend to some hombres."

"To any honest hombre that needs help," the tall cowboy said quietly. "I know him, yuh see. And don't worry, Mr. Thor. We'll try to see that that herd ain't spooked again."

He and Jan Thor moved outside, into the early morning air. The sun was up now, fighting to get through the mist. Jan Thor, dressed in levis, shirt and boots, went to the barn and saddled her palomino.

In short order then they had the herd rolling toward Roaring Horse. It was immediately plain to the ranch-bred girl that Wayne Morgan was a tophand. She watched him admiringly as he trailed the herd with expert ease.

They talked little. There were questions he would have liked to ask Jan, now that he was alone with her, especially about Cort Lash. But this he couldn't do without revealing his identity as the Masked Rider, or at least revealing that he was in intimate touch with the black-clad man. And that, of course, would not be advisable.

They reached Roaring Horse at noon, and drove the herd straight into the loading pens near the railway station. The buyer who was representing a Denver syndicate was waiting, and he gave Jan Thor a check for the cattle on the spot.

"Twenty-five hundred dollars!" Jan exclaimed to Wayne Morgan, sighing with relief. "Enough to pay the bank, with five hundred dollars left over!"

"Reckon it's a comfortable feelin'," Morgan said, smiling.

"You don't know how comfortable!" Jan told him eagerly. "You'll have to go to the bank to get your pay, Morgan, so you might as well watch me pay off Stone Heath. It'll be a pleasure, too, because I think he had an idea he might get the Eighty-eight spread.'"

"Who's this Stone Heath?" asked the cowboy.

"The bank president. I don't like him. He's foreclosed on several outfits, when he didn't have to. Well, let's go."

Morgan was not overlooking any bets, and now he suddenly wanted to meet the bank president, Stone Heath. He walked with Jan along the plank walk, turning with her into the town's most imposing building—a two-story brick structure. Inside, after looking quickly about, Jan asked for Stone Heath.

"In his office," the fat cashier grunted.

At the back of the bank was a closed door. Jan tapped on the door. "All right—what is it?" a gruff voice said.

JAN THOR pushed open the door, and she and Morgan went into the small, meagerly furnished room. Stone Heath sat behind a flat-topped desk that was littered with papers. He was a big, thick-bodied man, perhaps middle-aged. His heavy face was stern, his eyes cold, calculating, his mouth like a steel trap.

He glanced briefly at Wayne Morgan, getting heavily to his feet, his hooded gaze returning to the girl.

"Why, good morning, Miss Thor!" His cordiality seemed forced. "What can I do for you?"

Without ceremony, Jan Thor tossed the check onto the desk.

"I want to pay the two thousand dollars Father owes you," she said crisply. "And I want the remainder—in cash!"

Stone Heath picked up the check and looked at it. Morgan, watching closely, saw the banker's thin lips tighten. When he looked up, disappointment was plain in his cold eyes.

"Why, certainly, Jan," he said. "I see. —You must have sold your cattle? Why didn't Kemp bring this in himself?"

"Because he didn't feel like it!" The girl made no effort to hide her dislike for Heath. "The check's good, isn't it?"

"Of course it's good," said the banker suavely. "I suppose your father had his reasons for not coming in. I'll get the note and mortgage."

A cunning man, Wayne Morgan decided, a greedy, grasping, ruthless man—and filed the knowledge away in his brain for future reference.

When the mortgage business had been transacted, they said brief good mornings to the banker, and Wayne Morgan left the bank with Jan Thor. He walked along the street with her to where she had left her palomino.

She had stated her intention of returning to the ranch immediately.

"Yuh shore yuh don't have any more work for me?" Morgan asked.

She smiled, shook her red head.

"There won't be much to work with on the Eighty-eight for a while now," she said. "But you're welcome to drop by any time, Morgan. And maybe, later, there'll be something. Thanks for helping me."

He lifted his hat, watching as she swung into saddle and rode slowly along the street.

As plucky as she was pretty, he decided, and that was saying plenty.

As Jan Thor reached the lower end of the street, another rider entered it. Watching, Morgan saw the two horses slacken their paces, then stop altogether, the two riders facing each other. They were too far away for him to hear their voices, but he could tell they were talking.

Suddenly his interest was riveted on the horse the man who had just entered the town was riding. It was a rangy bay, and it had a blazed face and three white-stockinged feet!

Here, then, he reasoned, was Cort Lash. But he was too far away to tell much about the man's appearance, or to judge him by it.

The riders he watched talked only a moment or so. Then the girl rode on out of town and Cort Lash rode along the street.

His back against a hitch-post, Morgan studied the rider shrewdly.

Cort Lash was a slender, dark, handsome young fellow, little more than a boy. Leashed power was evident in his lithe body and there was a cynical quirk to his lips, a bitter recklessness in his dark eyes. There also was a hint of arrogance, of insolence, and deviltry about him.

As he rode past, the young rider's eyes flicked briefly, almost contemptuously at Morgan. Morgan continued to watch as he rode along the street, dismounted before a saloon, and went inside. Wayne Morgan stood a moment longer, looking thoughtfully at the bay with the white-stockinged feet.

He was uncertain of his next move. He didn't know yet just what he was up against. Was it a case of just plain rustling and thievery, or something more sinister? Why had the raiders singled out Kemp Thor for ruin and death? There were many others in the basin with bigger, richer spreads.

He went along the street and entered a general merchandise store, where he purchased a few supplies he and Blue Hawk had been needing.

Afterward, he strolled along the street and entered the same saloon he had seen Cort Lash go into.

Young Lash stood at the bar, alone, a bottle and glass before him. Morgan crossed to the bar, taking up a position several feet from Lash, and ordered rye. He seldom drank, but sometimes the pretense of drinking came in handy.

Now he wanted to study the outlaw's son carefully.

SEVERAL other men were in the saloon, drinking and playing poker, but what scant attention they paid to Cort Lash was not friendly. Obviously the outlaw's son was aware of their hostility, for his own eyes were contemptuous and insolent as he stared about the room. There was something cynical and a little wild in the way he smiled at them all.

Suddenly the batwings were pushed open and two more men entered the barroom. One of them was a tall, blond fellow with heavy shoulders and hawkish features. He wore a flat-crowned white hat, and a silver-handled six-shooter was thonged to his thigh. The man with him was tow-headed, blocky, and had a scar on one cheek.

The big man glanced quickly about the room, his gaze riveted almost instantly on Cort Lash. He strode across the room,

stopping close to the dark-faced youngster.

Lash seemed unaware of him until he spoke.

"Lash, I been wantin' to see yuh," the big yellow-haired man said flatly. "I want to talk to yuh."

Cort Lash turned slowly to face the speaker.

He was still grinning that faint, malicious grin.

"You see me, Shannon," he drawled. "Start talkin'!"

The room had suddenly become deadly quiet. Wayne Morgan looked with sharp interest at the thick-shouldered man. Here, he knew now, was Craig Shannon, son of old Dave Shannon who had died from rattlesnake bite. The man's tow-headed companion probably was one of his Crescent riders.

"What'd yuh crave to talk about, Shannon?" Lash repeated.

"Mebbe two-three things, hombre. First off, yuh ain't got any too good a reputation in these parts, considerin' yore pa was hanged for rustlin'. It don't do folks any good—especially girls—to be seen talkin' to yuh. Like out there in the street a few minutes ago!"

Cort Lash's face had gone pale and taut and ridges stood out along his lean jaws. It was obvious to Wayne Morgan that the young man was making a mighty effort to control his temper.

When Lash spoke his voice was calm, derisive.

"Yore personal property, Shannon?" he drawled.

"Mebbe, mebbe, not," Shannon rapped. "Just stay away from her. Another thing. On several occasions lately I've lost small bunches of cattle."

"And I reckon yuh expect me to cry about that?"

"No, I just expect yuh to let my cattle alone! Once a couple of my riders got close enough to the rustlers to see 'em—to see that one of the raiders was forkin' a bronc with a blazed face and three white stockin's!"

"Yuh accusin' me of rustlin'?" Lash said, tightly now.

"If it smells like yore rotten meat, hombre, eat it!"

"Shannon," Cort Lash said slowly, "yuh're a low-down blackhearted liar!"

CHAPTER VI

In Roaring Horse

CORT LASH had lunged forward, smashed Craig Shannon savagely in the face, before his challenging words were out of his mouth. The outlaw's son was forty pounds lighter than Shannon, but the blow had tremendous power behind it, and it hurled Shannon backward to the floor.

But he was on his feet almost instantly and ran hard at the lighter man. Lash sidestepped with the quick agility of a cat. Shannon lunged past him and crashed into the bar, and as he recoiled, Cort Lash leaped in again with that same incredible quickness. He hit Shannon in the midriff with his fist, and then, as Shannon doubled half-over, smashed him twice on the side of the head.

The Crescent owner staggered, went to his knees. He swayed there, shaking his head, looking up at Lash with dazed eyes. Cort Lash stood waiting, poised on the balls of his feet, still grinning that rash, arrogant grin. He reminded Morgan of a lean black tomcat, wicked and deadly.

Shannon got up slowly, clutching at the bar for support. He had no sooner straightened than Lash leaped at him tigerishly, slashing and pounding. Shannon plowed doggedly forward and flung his big arms about the slender young fellow. But Cort Lash twisted away, almost tearing Shannon's shirt from his body as he went. Then he was stalking the bigger man again, relentlessly, leaping in to maul and stab with his fists.

Wayne Morgan had never seen a man take a more merciless beating than Craig Shannon took during those few minutes. Finally the Crescent owner sagged against the bar, his shirt in tatters, his face slashed and bruised and bleeding.

Cort Lash was breathing hard, and there was a trickle of blood over one side of his face, but he was still grinning. There was no mirth in the grin, though. Instead, there was a dark, bitter fury.

"Remember that, Shannon, when yuh feel yore tongue comin' unhinged again," he said flatly. "And keep yore nose out of my business!"

Deliberately he turned his back on the beaten man and strode toward the batwings.

Craig Shannon's head jerked up. Cunning mingled with the fury and hate in his eyes. His hand jerked downward, came up clutching the silver-handled .45. His intentions were plain.

Wayne Morgan leaped forward and, just as Shannon pulled trigger, slapped at the Crescent man's gun arm. The gun blazed and roared, but the bullet slashed into the floor. Morgan seized Shannon's wrist and held it in a viselike grip.

Cort Lash had whirled, stood half-crouched, hand hovering over his own gun. His cold black eyes read the scene correctly.

"So that's yore stripe, Shannon?" he said contemptuously. "I'll remember it." He said to Morgan, "I'll remember you, too, cowboy. Thanks!"

He turned again and walked out into the street.

"Yuh meddlin' fool!" Shannon snapped at Morgan.

"Yuh're the fool, Shannon," Morgan said coolly. "I know this was none of my affair. But I wanted to stop yuh from doin' a thing yuh'd be bound to regret."

"He needed killin'!" Shannon growled angrily.

"Mebbe." Morgan shrugged carelessly. "But that wasn't the way to do it. It'd have been murder, regardless. Put up yore gun and behave yoreself!"

The rage remained in Shannon's eyes. But something in Morgan's calm tone, in his icy blue eyes, made him obey.

A stocky, square-faced man, carrying a black satchel, came down the stairway at the back of the room. His pale eyes peered through thick-lensed spectacles about the room. Morgan guessed him to be Dr. Caleb Lee, for he had heard that the town medico had his offices on the second story of the saloon building.

"I heard a lot of racket," Doc said crisply. "A shot. Is somebody hurt?"

Nobody said anything. Then Doc Lee's gaze paused on Craig Shannon. "U-um!" he murmured. "Looks like you are in need of medical aid, my friend."

"I'm all right," Shannon growled, and added darkly, "Better'n some hombres I know will be when I'm through with 'em."

There was another interruption as the batwings flapped open again, and a short, round little man with a graying mustache bustled into the room. He wore a sheriff's star on his vest.

"What's goin' on here?" he demanded. "Who fired that shot?"

"This gent here fired it," Morgan said quickly, indicating Shannon. "His gun went off accidental."

SHERIFF SAM CREWS grunted, peered at the battered Shannon.

"Reckon what happened to his face was accidental, too, huh?" he asked. "I heard you and Cort Lash had a fight, Shannon. Can't have ruckuses in my town. What was it about?"

"That's my business," Shannon snapped. "Let me alone, Crews!"

"Yuh're talkin' to the law, Shannon!" the rotund little sheriff warned, with dignity. "Makes no difference if yuh are old Dave Shannon's boy, yuh've got to behave. Now what was you and Cort Lash fightin' about?"

"He's been rustlin' Crescent cows," Shannon said shortly. "If yuh're so dead set on upholdin' the law, why don't yuh stop that?"

"I'm workin' on it," Sheriff Crews said pompously. "I need a little time, is all. Yuh got any proof it's Cort Lash?"

But Shannon shrugged, remained silent, for some reason electing not to mention the horse with the white stockings.

The sheriff turned and peered at Morgan, scowling.

"What'd you have to do with this, cowboy?"

"Nothin'," Morgan said. "I just happened to be here."

"Ain't you the hombre that helped Kemp Thor's gal drive some steers into town this mornin'?" asked the lawman.

"That's right, Sheriff," Morgan nodded. "I was just driftin' through, and broke, and heard she needed a hand. I ain't broke any law."

"Yuh'd better not! I'm watchin' yuh, and everybody else." The paunchy lawman glared truculently about the room, scowling darkly. "Behave, all of yuh, or I'll fling the whole kit-and-kaboodle in jail!"

He turned and waddled from the room.

Some of the men in the room grinned, but for a moment nobody spoke. Doc

Lee's mellow, unruffled voice broke the silence.

"I still say you need my services, friend," he said to Craig Shannon. "Won't you come up to my office?"

"Mebbe yuh're right, Doc," Shannon muttered. "A little patchin' up wouldn't hurt me."

He turned and went with the blocky, pale-eyed medico up the stairs. At the stairhead he turned his head to look back, staring with brief but dark hostility at Wayne Morgan, then vanished along a corridor.

Morgan turned back to the bar and ordered another rye, reflecting on the events of the last few hours. They were events which, possibly, had no relation to each other and to the mystery he was trying to solve. But, placing each incident and each actor in the drama in its proper niche, he decided that the day had been profitably spent.

After a few moments Craig Shannon came back down the stairs, his face cleansed of blood and his cuts smeared with iodine. He stalked through the barroom without speaking or glancing at anybody. Looking through the window Wayne Morgan saw him go to the hitchrack, get his horse, and ride out of town.

Morgan left the saloon himself then. He made a couple more purchases, then went to the hitchrack where he had left the hammer-headed roan. But, about to mount, he changed his mind and went back along the street to the saloon he had left a short time before.

He climbed the stairs and went along a corridor, pausing before a door that was marked:

DOCTOR CALEB LEE
Physician

As he was about to rap on the door, it was opened abruptly and a man came out. The man, whom Morgan had never seen before, was wearing dusty range garb.

He scowled at Morgan, stepped past him without speaking and went along the corridor, apparently leaving the building by a rear, outside stairway.

Doc Lee saw Morgan standing there in the hall, and came forward smilingly.

"Good afternoon, my friend," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Mighty little I'm afraid, Doctor, that'll be of profit to yuh." Morgan grinned, stepped into the room. "I don't need patchin' up—only a little information. I saw yuh downstairs a few minutes ago and thought yuh might help me."

Doc spread his hands. "Anything I can do, I'll be glad to."

"I'm thinkin' about takin' a job here in the basin," said Morgan. "I figgered mebbe yuh could tell me a good, honest outfit."

"There are many honest outfits," Doc Lee said. "For instance, there's Shannon's Crescent ranch. Craig Shannon's quick-tempered, perhaps a little arrogant, but I believe honest."

"I doubt if he'd give me a job." Morgan grinned a little apologetically. "I kind of —messed him up a little while ago. Didn't want to see him shoot a man in the back. What about this Cort Lash?"

DOC LEE looked at him sharply, then shrugged.

"A man can be his own judge about who's honest," he said. "But if you want a steady, peaceable riding job, I wouldn't advise hiring on with Cort Lash. Nor with Bill Quady's Cross T. You asked my advice, and I'm giving it. Now, there's Jim Rand, and Pat Mullan, and any number of others."

"I hear there's trouble in the basin," Morgan said tentatively.

"There's always trouble wherever there are men. Men fight, mutilate, and kill each other. It's my job to save those who are only mutilated. Have I helped you, cowboy?"

"Yeah, I figger yuh have. Thanks."

Morgan turned, went back down the stairs and into the street. With no further pause he mounted the roan and rode out of town.

Some time had passed, and he was miles to the west when he threaded his way along the bank of a noisy, timber-hemmed creek. Suddenly from his lips ensued the snarling, throaty cry of a mountain lion. The cry was answered almost instantly from a spot directly ahead.

Heading directly toward the sound, he rode into the open space at the base of towering red walls that was his and Blue Hawk's camp site. The Yaqui was squatted beside a fire over which bubbled a pot of

BLUE HAWK

coffee. A welcoming smile lighted Blue Hawk's usually impassive features as he saw the tall rider.

"Coffee, Senor," he remarked, looking searchingly at his friend's face. "You were gone a long time."

"I had to earn my pay." Morgan swung to the ground. "Find anything interestin', Hawk?"

The Indian shook his head. "I scouted over the basin, as you advised. I watched the Senor Cort Lash's ranch, until I saw one I judged to be him ride away toward town. I saw nothing suspicious anywhere."

"Dishonest men ride at night, mostly." Morgan squatted beside the fire and poured coffee into a tin cup. "I met Cort Lash in town. Also Craig Shannon. Next, I want to see Bill Quady. I figger a gent named Stone Heath will bear watchin', too."

Briefly, as he sipped the coffee, he told Blue Hawk in complete detail of the day's events.

"I don't know just where Kemp Thor fits into all this, but he does," he ended up with conviction. "Thor, I'm plumb shore, is honest. So he's the man we've got to watch—and help. Somebody wants more than just his cattle or land—they want his life!"

"What about the others—the Senores Lash, Heath and Shannon?" asked the Yaqui. "Are they honest?"

"I don't know—yet," Morgan said frankly. "Mebbe they all are honest. Mebbe our man who's doin' all the ruckus-raisin' is somebody we haven't even seen or heard of. That's the mystery that we've got to solve."

"And we will solve it, Senor, as we have solved others," Blue Hawk said positively.

"We shore will!"

CHAPTER VII

Buzzards—and Bullets

FOURTEEN hours after the Masked Rider's visit to Roaring Horse, he crouched atop a rock escarpment and stared down into a little depression. A frown of puzzlement creased his forehead as he watched.

The sun had dispersed most of the early-morning mist that lay over the basin and was just beginning to make its heat felt. The yellow orb was high

enough in the sky to shine directly down into the depression, the floor of which was studded with boulders and piles of shale.

A man was down in the depression, poking about among the boulders with a queer-looking stick. He was unaware of the Masked Rider's presence on the escarpment, although the masked man had trailed him to the sink from a spot several miles away.

Midnight, the black stallion, was tethered in a nearby thicket.

The Masked Rider's puzzlement increased as he moved closer, watching the queer scene. The fellow's horse stood ground-hitched a few yards away. A covered, five-gallon pail was on the ground near the man. He was slab-bodied, thin-faced, with a beaklike nose, and he kept turning over boulders and poking about among the shale with the forked stick in his hand.

Suddenly, as he overturned a small boulder, the man leaped backward as though startled. Then the Masked Rider saw what had startled him. A huge rattlesnake had wriggled out from under the boulder, and now it jerked itself into a tight coil, its wedge-shaped head jutting upward!

Suddenly the Masked Rider realized that this was what the slab-bodied man had been looking for.

The man inched cautiously forward, the forked stick out-thrust. The reptile's wicked-looking head swayed, and the masked man could hear its furious, warning rattling.

The man below inched still closer, jabbing at the coils with the stick.

The rattler struck suddenly, lightning-fast.

The slab-bodied man leaped backward, and then, before the rattler could jerk back into its coil, he jumped forward again and jammed the forks of the stick over the snake's body just behind the wedge-like head, pinning the reptile to the earth. The rattler threshed about furiously.

But plainly the tall man was no novice at this rattler business. He had done this kind of hunting before. He stooped suddenly, ignoring the lashing coils, and gripped the rattler just behind the gaping jaws between his thumb and forefinger. He removed the stick and straightened. The rattler, helpless, wrapped its bloated body about his arm.

The thin-faced man went to the pail and removed the lid. With his free hand he removed the snake's coils from about his arm, dropped the rattler into the pail, and quickly clamped the lid back on. The Masked Rider could hear the snake threshing about inside the pail.

His task apparently finished, the snake-man lashed the pail to his saddle-horn, mounted, and rode up out of the depression. He passed within a hundred feet of the spot where the Masked Rider crouched among a nest of boulders, without suspecting the presence of an onlooker, and rode over a slight rise.

The Masked Rider returned to Midnight and stood for a thoughtful moment beside the big stallion, his wide forehead creased in a worried frown. His interest had been aroused a short time before when he had spotted the slab-bodied man riding across the rough country with the pail on his saddle. There had been something about the fellow and, on impulse, he had followed him.

Now, after what he had seen, his interest was doubly aroused. Who was the man, and why had he gone to the trouble of capturing the huge rattler alive? It was possible, of course, that he had been hired by a zoo, or a circus, to capture the reptile. Still, that did not seem too plausible.

Still playing a hunch, the Masked Rider mounted the stallion and rode in the direction the man with the pail had taken. He wanted to see where the man was going with that snake. Within a few minutes he came within sight of the snake-man who was riding unhurriedly along. At a safe distance, and keeping to the shelter of timber and ravines as much as possible, he followed.

The man was headed in the general direction of Roaring Horse. Occasionally he looked furtively behind and to each side, which served to strengthen the hunch the Robin Hood rider was playing. Sometimes the snake-man was in plain view, at times he dipped into ravines or rode over ridges and was lost from view for several moments.

Then the masked man would catch sight of him again.

IT WAS during one of those moments, when the quarry was out of sight,

that a mighty hammer seemed to slam suddenly against the Masked Rider's head. The world appeared to explode in a crimson burst of zooming pinwheels and shooting stars before his eyes. Dimly, he heard the blasting report of a rifle.

He was not aware of falling, but abruptly he realized that he was on the ground. He was lying on his stomach, one arm doubled under him, the sun striking warmly against his back. There rushed over him the bitter knowledge that he had walked into a bushwhack trap set by the slab-bodied snake man.

He was momentarily stunned, incapable of movement even if he had not realized instinctively that if he moved now it would probably mean sudden death. He knew he was not badly hurt, or he wouldn't still be conscious. There was a fiercely burning sensation along one side of his skull and he could feel something warm running over his face, and by this he judged that the rifle bullet had creased his skull.

He lay still, expecting each second to feel the rending tear of death-dealing lead through his body. He had fallen on the rocky floor of a little depression that was two hundred yards across and rimmed by rock escarpments. His last sight of the lanky man had been when he had ridden over the rim of the depression only seconds before, and to all appearances totally unaware that he was being trailed by the man in black.

Obviously, however, the snake man had known he was being followed. He had waited until the Masked Rider had dipped into the sink, where he presented a plain target, then had shot him from the saddle. Midnight had galloped to a spot a hundred feet away, where he stood with upflung head, regarding his rider questioningly.

The Masked Rider lay with his head half-turned to one side so that he could see the spot where the snake man had vanished. Through barely slitted eyes he studied the spot—and suddenly he saw a slight movement there, the gleam of sunlight on a rifle barrel. Then he knew, beyond doubt, that if he moved he would die. The bushwhacker was still there, waiting, watching.

His twin six-shooters were still in their holsters. But the range was too great for a belt gun. And his rifle was a hundred feet away, in its saddle-boot.

Maybe he would die anyhow. But the Masked Rider was a keen judge of human nature. He knew that curiosity is a powerful thing. The bushwhacker was watching him, not knowing whether he was alive or dead. The uncertainty would be like a dark weight in his mind, swaying him this way and that, nagging him.

And the masked avenger also had learned that there were some men who would take life without hesitation, but would flinch from putting a bullet into a dead man.

The masked man closed his eyes and lay still as a stone. He could feel the cruel eyes of the killer peering at him. Several minutes passed. The sun hammered at him, and huge red ants crawled over his face and body. His head ached savagely. He opened his eyes a trifle.

The bushwhacker was still up there. He had raised himself slightly now, so that his head and shoulders were limned plainly against the hot sky. Rifle in hand, he stared intently down at the motionless figure.

The Masked Rider heard a swift, rushing sound then—and knew suddenly what the bushwhacker was waiting for.

Even before he had been bushwhacked he had noticed several buzzards circling high overhead. Now the vultures, sensing death, had swooped lower and lower over his still figure. They were so low he could hear the rustle of their wings, their harsh hissing and croaking as they quarreled among themselves.

The Robin Hood outlaw grimaced. Buzzards overhead, and a human vulture on the ground. But the human vulture was far more deadly than the winged ones!

It was hard to fool a buzzard. The bushwhacker was watching the black birds of Death. If they swooped upon the motionless figure, then it would be safe for him to emerge from his hiding place.

The buzzards dropped lower and lower. The Masked Rider could smell them and feel the greedy probe of their eyes. The sun was hot on his face and the huge ants made fiery trails over his sweaty body. He had to fight himself to keep from leaping to his feet and pumping lead at the human vulture on the rimrock.

BUT if he moved even a fraction of an inch, he would die. In the hand

that was concealed under his body, he gripped the handle of one of the black six-shooters. He lay, barely breathing, as torturous minutes passed.

Lower and lower the buzzards dropped. Now they were only a few feet above him.

And then, suddenly, one of them flapped to the ground not fifteen feet away. Almost immediately, several others followed. They huddled there, like evil old men in quarrelsome conclave, hissing and snapping their beaks as they peered at him.

Almost instantly then the Masked Rider heard a clattering of shale that told him the bushwhacker had left the rimrock and was clambering down toward him. Opening his eyes slightly, he saw the slab-bodied man descending swiftly into the sink.

The buzzards waddled in closer, croaking and shouldering against each other in their greedy eagerness. Vultures, he had heard, always pecked at a man's eyes first.

Now the killer was fifty feet away, now forty. His rifle was thrust out warily before him. The slow thud of his boots seemed thunderous.

The buzzards backed away, croaking angrily.

The boot thuds stopped abruptly. The Masked Rider's eyes were closed, but he could feel the cold, wicked probe of the lanky killer's eyes as they roved over his body.

"Dead as burnt grass," he heard the man mutter hoarsely. "Yuh can't fool a buzzard!"

And at that exact moment the Masked Rider, moving with incredible quickness, flopped over and reared to his knees. His gun snaked up.

The thin-faced killer croaked with ludicrous surprise, like one of the buzzards. He leaped backward, rifle muzzle rising.

The masked man's gun blasted, and the close-range bullet smashed the bushwhacker to the ground. He rolled over, scuttling a few feet on hands and knees like a huge spider, then abruptly collapsed on the sand.

The Masked Rider got slowly to his feet. He knew the man was dead. He never liked to take life, but he felt no remorse now as he stared down at the dead man. One of them had had to die, and his act had been purely one of self-preservation.

The buzzards had flapped with harsh croaks into the air. Now they soared away hissing their surprise and anger.

Hearing a sudden clatter of hoofs, the Masked Rider lifted his gaze from the dead man to the rim of the sink. Two riders who must have heard the shots had topped the escarpment. They had seen the black-clad figure, and were sweeping toward him, guns in hand.

And one of the riders, the masked man saw, was Craig Shannon!

CHAPTER VIII

Escape!

HANDS dropping to his twin black guns, the Masked Rider whirled. But he did not draw the guns. For one thing, the oncoming riders already had him covered.

Besides, he had done nothing wrong. He had only killed to save his own life, and honest men would understand that. He had small reason to think that Craig Shannon was dishonest.

He stood there, alert and wary, hands on gun-butts, as the two riders dragged their mounts to a halt a few yards away. The second rider, he saw now, was the tow-headed, scar-faced young fellow he had seen with Shannon in the Roaring Horse Saloon. Their guns still covering him, they surveyed the masked man with cold, unfriendly eyes.

"The Masked Rider, eh?" Shannon grunted. "And still up to yore old tricks, I see!"

"This hombre tried to drygulch me," the masked man said coldly. "I had to kill him to save my own life."

"Mebbe so, and mebbe not!" Shannon sneered. "From what I've heard yuh kill just to see a man wiggle in the dust."

"Then yuh've heard a lie!" snapped the Masked Rider. "See here, Shannon—"

"How come yuh know my name?"

The masked man saw he had made a mistake.

"I know Craig Shannon owns the Crescent outfit, and you two are ridin' Crescent branded hosses," he said quickly. "Yuh are Shannon, ain't yuh?"

"That's right"—Craig Shannon nodded—"and I've got no use for low-down

killers! Keep him covered, Ike."

Shannon swung to the ground, followed by the tow-headed Ike.

"Why are yuh in this valley, Masked Rider?" Shannon demanded shortly.

"For the same reason I go to other places," the black-clad man said quietly. "Because there is evil here. Because here there are wicked men who want to kill and plunder, to trample the rights of honest men under their boots. Can yuh think of a better reason?"

Shannon's eyes narrowed. He seemed uncertain of himself. Then he shrugged.

"That's a right pretty speech," he drawled. "But it don't tie in with things I've heard. I've heard you're the one who kills and plunders. And this"—he jerked his gun-muzzle toward the dead man—"seems to prove it."

"I told yuh this jasper bushwhacked me!"

"Why? Was yuh trailin' him?"

The Masked Rider started to speak, then closed his lips. For his own reasons, he preferred not to mention the snake incident.

"Do yuh know this gent?" he countered.

Shannon jerked his gun-muzzle again, and Ike turned the dead man over. Shannon glanced at the exposed face briefly.

"Never saw the jigger before," he growled. "But that don't make any difference. Masked Rider, I'm takin' yuh into town and turnin' yuh over to Sheriff Sam Crews!"

The Masked Rider thought swiftly. Shannon obviously was serious. That, of course, didn't mean he was dishonest. Plenty of other men, all over the West, in Shannon's position, would have made the same decision. Almost as many men considered him an outlaw, a merciless killer, as those who knew the truth—that he was a nemesis of such criminals.

But the Masked Rider had no intention of going to jail. He shook his head grimly.

"No!" he said, with determination. "I've never been in jail and I don't aim to start now!"

"Them reward flyers I've seen say 'dead or alive'," Shannon said flatly. "They also say nobody's ever seen yore face without that mask. Now's as good a time as any for that to happen, too!"

Shannon took a quick forward step, reached a hand to rip the domino mask from the tall man's face.

The masked man leaped backward. He stood half-crouched, hands on the butts of the black guns, his eyes cold and deadly.

"No man takes this mask off my face, Shannon, while I'm alive! Try it and yuh'll die!"

"We're two to one," Shannon reminded. "We can cut yuh down and then take it off."

"I'll make mighty certain that you die before I do, Shannon!" The Masked Rider's voice now was cold as ice.

The Crescent owner paused, made uncertain by the cold ferocity in the masked man's words. There was something chilling and final about them that could not be ignored.

Before Shannon could make up his mind there was an interruption.

"Freeze up, gents," a bull-like voice slammed at them. "Is this a private party, or can we horn in?"

SHANNON and the tow-headed Ike stiffened, turning slowly, for the voice had come from behind them. The Masked Rider half turned his head without moving his body.

Three men stood with heads and shoulders jutting above a waist-high boulder forty feet away. They had guns in their hands. It was immediately plain to the Masked Rider that the three, taking advantage of his own and Shannon's and Ike's intense concentration upon each other, and using a line of boulders as shelter, had crept down from the escarpment to gain their position.

He had never seen either of these three men before. He had no reason to hope that their coming would benefit him.

"Drop yore hardware!" the man with the bull-like voice rapped at Shannon and his companion.

The two sullenly obeyed, flinging their guns to the ground.

"This is none of yore affair, Quady!" Shannon said angrily. "Better stay out of it."

The three came out from behind the boulder. One of them—Bill Quady, apparently—was a huge, red-haired man with heavy, whisky-red features and round little eyes. He was grinning, but there was no mirth in the grin, and the

round little eyes showed him eager for violence.

"What ho, rooster!" he said to Shannon jocularly. "So yuh've captured the great Masked Rider. And what we got here? A dead man?"

"Stay out of this, Quady," Shannon said again sullenly. "The Masked Rider gulched that gent. He's wanted for lots of other killin's, and I'm turnin' him over to the law."

"Are yuh, now?" Quady took a bottle from his pocket, up-ended it and gulped noisily. "Well, I won't know about that. I always figgered the Masked Rider was my kind of man." He turned to the masked man. "That straight goods, about yuh gulchin' this buzzard-nosed turkey?"

The Masked Rider had been standing stock-still, appraising this new turn of affairs, forming his judgment of Bill Quady. The man, obviously, was half-drunk. His talk was bluff and hearty. But in his little eyes there was something sly and wicked and treacherous.

The black-clad man made a quick decision. Quady was not to be trusted.

"This hombre tried to gulch me," he answered as he shook his head. "I killed him to save my own life. Yuh know who he is?"

"Gobbler by the name of Tonk Raven," Quady said readily. "Been hangin' about Roarin' Horse. Wasn't worth a cuss. Beefin' him was a dang good idea, Masked Rider."

"Glad to hear that. I reckon mebbe yuh're my kind of man, too, Quady. And now, if yuh've got no objections, I reckon I'll be ridin'."

"Just a minute," Quady said sharply, as the masked man started to turn away. "I'd like to palaver with yuh some—after I get rid of these Crescent roosters!"

"For the last time, Quady, keep yore nose outa of this," Craig Shannon warned savagely. "The Masked Rider's a criminal. But mebbe you are, too. From what I—"

Bill Quady swung a massive fist and slammed it into Shannon's face. The savage blow smashed the Crescent man to the ground. Quady laughed down at him as he rolled in the dust, and it was a low, wicked sound. It was plain to the Masked Rider that between Quady and Shannon there was bitter enmity.

Shannon got slowly to his feet, his face twisted with rage. But he said nothing. It was plain that he was afraid of Quady.

"Get out of here, buckos," Quady said to Shannon and Ike. "Go on, get out!"

"Yuh've got by with too much as it is, Quady—" Shannon began furiously.

"Get on—get on!"

Still grinning, Quady stepped toward Shannon. Shannon turned abruptly, followed by Ike, and stepped into saddle. They rode up out of the sink and vanished over the 'scarp.

"Now, my black-feathered eagle," the red-haired giant said, turning to the Masked Rider, "we'll talk. What yuh want here?"

"Justice," the masked man said quietly.

"Justice?" Quady roared with laughter. He produced the bottle, swigged noisily, smacked his lips. "And where, *amigo*, do yuh think yuh'll find it?"

"Justice is not always found. Sometimes it has to be made—with blood, gunsmoke and lead!"

QUADY laughed again, grinned slyly at his two cronies. The Masked Rider found himself liking this man less and less. He sensed instinctively that, for all his apparent friendliness, Quady meant him only harm. Perhaps Quady meant to kill him, and his whisky-inflamed brain was enjoying this little sport first. Or perhaps he meant only to collect the rich bounty on his head.

The Robin Hood rider's eyes flicked briefly at a spot on the rim-rock behind Quady and his riders. He had seen a slight movement there. Or had he only imagined it?

"My kind of man," Bill Quady repeated. "We could get rich. How'd yuh like to team up with me, Masked Rider?"

"Might not be a bad idea," drawled the masked man. "What kind of layout yuh got?"

"That's a secret." The giant grinned, and winked. "But I wouldn't tie-up with no hombre till I saw his face. Yuh wouldn't let Shannon take that mask off. But I reckon it'd be all right for me to do it, huh?"

The Masked Rider said nothing, didn't move.

Still grinning, Quady stepped forward and reached forth a big, hair-covered hand.

The masked man moved then, with lightning speed. He seized Quady's wrist, jerked, twisted. Quady yelled with surprise and pain—and suddenly found himself with his back against the Masked Rider's chest, his right arm twisted backward and up until it was almost being torn from the socket.

He felt the hard bore of a gun-muzzle against his spine.

"Tell yore poodles to be good, Quady, or I'll blow yuh apart!" the Masked Rider spat.

Quady's two riders had been taken as completely by surprise as had their boss. They were jumping excitedly about, trying to get in a shot at the black-garbed man.

"Quit it, yuh fools!" Quady howled. "The Masked Rider don't bluff!"

A rifle crashed on the 'scarp, the bullet kicking up dust between the two hard-faced punchers.

"The next bullet, senores, will get no dust on it!" a ringing voice cried. "Drop the guns!"

Quady's men couldn't see that hidden rifleman, but they could read the menace in that deep, cold voice. They hesitated only briefly. Then their guns thudded to the ground.

The Masked Rider jerked Quady's gun from its holster and stepped away from him. Quady was not grinning now. He was cursing in a low, wicked monotone.

"And now, my red-feathered rooster," the masked man mimicked, "I will do the talkin', and you will do the ridin'! Or walkin', as the case may be. Get started, pronto!"

"I'll get yuh for this, yuh lobo!" Quady snarled.

"Get started!" The Masked Rider's voice was suddenly like a whiplash. "Next time, yuh might not get off so easy!"

Bill Quady and his two riders turned and climbed up out of the tiny sink. The Masked Rider followed them to the spot where their horses were tethered on the rim-rock, watched warily as they mounted and spurred away.

Blue Hawk came from his place of concealment then.

"Good work, Hawk," the masked man said warmly. "Yore bullet made up them two hombres' minds."

"Maybe you would soon have made up their minds for them, Senor," the Yaqui said modestly. "Your trick was a good one."

"Mebbe I wouldn't have had nerve enough to try it, though, if I hadn't known you was up here to back my play."

Blue Hawk seemed crestfallen. "You mean, Senor, I was so careless as to reveal my presence?"

The Masked Rider smiled covertly. Blue Hawk was justly proud of his stalking ability.

"What I meant, Hawk, is that I suspected yuh was there. Because yuh're nearly always in the right place at the right time—for me!"

CHAPTER IX

The Kettle Boils

SHORTLY after noon of that same day Wayne Morgan left the camp site beside the creek and took a roundabout route that was designed, finally, to take him to Kemp Thor's 88 ranchhouse. He thought it likely that Thor could clear up several questions that were bothering him.

As yet, he was forced to admit, he had made only slight progress. He had not formed definite opinions regarding either Cort Lash or Bill Quady. Young Lash was hot-tempered, bitterly resentful because the basin folks, as a result of his being the son of an outlaw, had made him a virtual outcast. But that was not proof he was behind the deviltry that was afoot.

Morgan's opinion of Bill Quady was quite definite in some respects. Quady was a whisky-guzzler; sly, treacherous, a violent, quarrelsome trouble-maker. But neither did that prove that *he* was back of the deviltry.

Stone Heath, the banker? A shrewd, greedy, ruthless man.

Craig Shannon? Shannon had Morgan puzzled. He, too, seemed quarrelsome and quick-tempered, although, on the two occasions Morgan had observed him, Shannon had seemed to be an honest man following an honest man's convictions.

Morgan paused at a water-hole that was hemmed by white adobe cliffs, to let the roan drink. The crumbly walls shone

dazzlingly white in the sunshine. The horse's hoofs stirred up geysers of white dust at the pool's edge.

Obviously the water was brackish or bitter, for the roan pawed and sniffed at it, reluctant to drink. Then Morgan recalled that on the cattle drive to town, Jan Thor had mentioned Soda Springs, on the extreme western edge of the 88 range. This obviously was Soda Springs.

Morgan dismounted and scooped up a handful of the powdery dust. When he dipped it in the water, it made a snowy-white, pasty substance that clung like glue to his hands.

The tall cowboy thoughtfully washed his hands, remounted and rode on toward the 88 spread.

Half a mile from the place a dense grove of towering pines flanked the creek. Sunlight filtering through the pines made a silver-and-ebony lacework on the ground.

As he approached the grove, Morgan glimpsed two figures in the deep shadows beside the stream. One of them, he saw instantly, was Cort Lash. The other was Jan Thor.

Jan was in Cort Lash's arms and he was kissing her.

Morgan swerved the roan and rode on. The two didn't see him.

What he had just seen might complicate matters—for somebody—but it didn't change facts. He had known before this that the two were in love. Who was wrong in his or her estimation of Cort Lash? Jan Thor or her father?

At the 88 he found Kemp Thor propped in a rocker with a pillow behind him. He was obviously much improved.

"Had Doc Lee out and he fixed me up fine," the rancher declared, after he had cordially welcomed Morgan. "Don't know what the basin'd do without Doc, what with so many folks all the time gettin' shot up and snake-bit and all."

"He don't seem to have much luck with snake bite," Morgan drawled. "Didn't yuh say both Dave Shannon and this Hartley dude died after bein' rattler bit?"

"Shore did." Thor nodded. "But then they was both dead before anybody found 'em."

"Yuh remember what it was old Dave Shannon and his son, Craig, quarreled about?" Morgan asked, after they both had fallen silent for a few moments.

"Why, danged if I do!" Thor answered. "For that matter, Dave and the young 'un had lots of quarrels. The boy was wild as a swamp rabbit. He was a trouble-maker—always gamblin', drinkin' and fightin'. Now that I think of it, their fallin' out was over a big gamblin' loss the button had, that last time, and old Dave told him to get out and not come back till he was a man. That was just about six months after Craig had got cut up pretty bad in that fight with Johnny Bones over at Gateway."

"Johnny Bones used a knife on him, huh?" Morgan appeared interested and his eyes brightened with curiosity.

"Reckon it was a knife," Thor grunted. "Leastwise, it done an awful lot of damage. The young hellion like to of died. Got him here." The rancher made a broad motion with his finger over his chest. "Barely missed his heart. I remember it was rainin' that night, and the wind blowin' a storm, and I helped pack him in to the Crescent and went on to town after Doc Lee."

"Lucky to get over it without leavin' any bad effects," Morgan offered.

"That's the way I figger it. When he left the basin six months later all he had to show for it was a mess of scars on his chest. Reckon he'll carry 'em to his grave."

"Seems to be on the square now," Morgan remarked thoughtfully. "I saw him in town yesterday. He had a fight with Cort Lash. Shannon accused Lash of rustlin' Crescent cows."

"I heard about that. I reckon Crescent has lost cattle like the rest of us." The rancher shook his head somberly. "I don't know about Cort Lash. I hate to convict him just because his dad was a thief. My girl thinks the boy's square. I'm afraid she's got to likin' him a little too much, to my notion."

MORGAN didn't mention having seen Cort Lash and Thor's daughter together only a few moments before.

"What about the bronc with the three white-stockinged feet?" he asked.

Thor looked sharply at the tall cowboy.

"Did Jan mention that to yuh? I hadn't told anybody about that, except the Masked Rider."

Morgan mentally berated himself for his

carelessness. He quickly covered his mistake, however.

"I heard Shannon tell Cort Lash that one of the raiders stealin' Crescent cattle rode that kind of hoss. And I saw Lash's blazed-face bay. What was it yuh hadn't told anybody except the Masked Rider?"

He listened while Kemp Thor repeated the story of the raid a few nights before.

"Looks bad for Lash, all right," Morgan admitted. "But why would he want to ruin yuh?"

"I don't know." Thor shrugged helplessly. "All I know is that somebody does. More, they want me dead. I've been afraid to light a lamp at night, scared some hombre'll pot me through a window. I'm just about ready to give up."

"Ain't no time to give up, when the Masked Rider's sidin' yuh," Wayne Morgan said earnestly.

"He said he'd help us, but—"

"If he said he'd help you, then he'll do it, like he's helped other honest men and women. Meanwhile, I've got an idea."

Wayne Morgan talked with Kemp Thor for half an hour longer, then got up to leave. As he went about to mount the roan, Jan Thor rode up on her palomino. Her blue eyes were sparkling, but there was a certain sadness about her red-lipped mouth. She looked more lovely than ever in a fawn-colored riding outfit.

"Leaving so soon, cowboy?" she asked.

"Got some business to attend to," Morgan said, grinning.

"Such as not gathering any moss?" she said gaily.

"Yeah, somethin' like that. Mebbe yore dad'll tell yuh what it is. So long!"

He swung into saddle and rode away without looking back. But he had gone no more than two hundred yards, just through a belt of jackpines, when he saw a rider coming toward him. The rider was Craig Shannon. Shannon was obviously headed for the 88. Had he, Morgan wondered, been spying on Jan Thor all this time?

As Shannon drew up even with Morgan, he pulled his sorrel to a halt. Surprise touched Morgan. He had expected hostility from Shannon, and instead the Crescent man was smiling agreeably.

"Howdy, Morgan," he said. "I've been wantin' to see yuh."

"Yuh see me, Shannon," Morgan said cautiously. "If it's about that little ruckus in town—"

"That's just what it's about! But not the way yuh think. I wanted to apologize."

"That's all right." Morgan shrugged. "Mebbe I stuck my nose in the wrong stump."

"Yuh saved me from makin' a fool of myself, mebbe worse," Shannon said soberly. "I let my temper throw me. If yuh've been in the basin more than three days yuh've heard about that temper."

"I heard a little," Morgan admitted, still cautious and a little puzzled.

Shannon frowned slowly, shook his head.

"I was a wild young buck, back before I quarreled with Pap and lit a shuck to Texas. He should have took the hide off me. Lookin' back, I can't see a time when he wasn't right and I was wrong. Yeah, I know—it's mighty late to admit that. But I reckon yuh know how a fool kid is."

"Yeah," Morgan answered. "Fact is, Shannon, Kemp Thor was talkin' about that just a few minutes ago. I guess nobody holds them days against yuh. Kemp Thor didn't. And I reckon everybody has got a lot of good in 'em, even wild kids. Thor was tellin' me how yuh jumped into Wolf Creek, with it all a-flood and filled with ice, to rescue his girl, Jan—and nearly got drowned yoreself. She was just a little tike then, wasn't she?"

"What's that?" Shannon looked sharply at Morgan, frowning. Then he grinned. "Oh, yeah—that time! Been so long I'd nearly forgot. Yeah, she was just a pig-tailed brat then. Big enough to nearly drown me, though."

"Like I said, there's some good in everybody," repeated Morgan. "And some bad. Well, Shannon, I'll be seein' yuh."

Morgan lifted his hand and rode on. Craig Shannon looked frowningly after the tall rider until he vanished over a low

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ridge, then turned his sorrel and rode on toward the 88. . . .

THE rider in the night came along the creek and stopped his horse in a dense growth of timber two hundred yards behind the 88 ranchhouse. Here he dismounted, tied his horse to a sapling and went forward afoot, silent as a night-prowling cougar. When he reached the pole corral he paused, studying the scene with wary, cunning eyes.

The ranchhouse, so far as he could see from where he stood, was dark. Mist rose from the creek and curled its gray tendrils about the buildings. Except for the low moan of the wind in the pines, there was no sound.

The night prowler grimaced. Apparently this was to be another wild goose chase. Kemp Thor was too shrewd to make a light.

The prowler left the corral and slowly circled the ranchhouse, eyes wary, gun in hand.

And suddenly, as he came to the front of the house, he drew in his breath with a greedy, triumphant sound.

"The poor dumb fool!" he muttered.

For lamplight glowed in the front room, through an unshaded window. On a table in the room, in direct line with the window, burned a smoky kerosene lamp. And, on the far side of the table, head and shoulders etched dimly in the lamplight, was the figure of a man!

Propped before the figure was a newspaper. Smoke was curling from a pipe in the man's mouth. Although the man's face was in shadows, the prowler could see the man's mustache.

The figure made a perfect, if indistinct target.

"Dumb jackass!" the prowler muttered again.

Deliberately he raised the gun in his hand, and the mist-shrouded night was torn asunder by the crashing roar of gunshots, by leaping red flames, and the hiss of lead. The night prowler emptied his gun, the blasting roars beating swiftly upon each other.

The figure in the ranchhouse swayed, tumbled sideways to the floor.

"All right, hombre," a cold voice behind the killer said. "Yore gun's empty. Freeze!"

CHAPTER X

"Cort Lash Hired Me!"

INSTANTLY the killer whirled, spitting like a cornered puma, knowing he had been tricked. He saw a shadowy figure, close, towering over him. He dropped his empty gun, snatched up inside his shirt for the long-bladed knife that was there.

The shadowy figure leaped at him, swung the clubbed gun he held ready. The prowler wilted, sprawled on the ground.

The ranchhouse door was flung open and Jan Thor ran out onto the porch.

"Morgan!" she cried. "Are—did you—"

"All right, Jan," Wayne Morgan said calmly.

He lifted the unconscious man easily to his powerful shoulders, strode to the house and into the lighted living room, where he dumped the man ungently to the floor. The fellow was squat, bald, dark-faced. He was stirring slightly, shaking his bald head.

Kemp Thor came slowly in from the adjoining room. He stared down at the man, gray-faced. Jan's eyes were wide, a little frightened.

"Know this jasper?" Morgan asked grimly.

"Name's Baldy Knabb," Thor replied. "A no-good loafer and gambler. He's held down jobs with several outfits in the basin. Last one was with Cort Lash."

"But Cort fired him, for beating a horse!" Jan said quickly. "He told me all about it."

"Baldy" Knabb opened his eyes. He sat up and looked dazedly about the room. When he saw Kemp Thor, his eyes flared wide with surprise.

"You—" he stammered. "I thought—"

"Yeah, yuh thought yuh'd filled my carcass full of lead," the rancher said wrathfully. "Yuh would have, too, if it'd been me settin' in that chair instead of that dummy!"

He pointed, and Knabb stared with round, incredulous eyes at the thing there on the floor beside the table where the slashing bullets had tumbled it from a box. It was a hunk of sticky clay from the creek-bed.

The clay had been molded with infinite cunning into the likeness of the upper portion of a man's body, even to the eyes and nose and mustache. A shirt had been draped over the clay figure's shoulders, a lighted pipe stuck into its mouth.

"I figgered some skunk was out to gulch me," Kemp Thor said grimly. "So we cooked up this little scheme to test it, Morgan here makin' the dummy. Done a good job, too, looks like. Knabb, who hired yuh to kill me?"

"I ain't talkin'," the prisoner said sullenly.

"There's ways of makin' yuh talk," Wayne Morgan said sternly. "A hot poker against the bottoms of yore feet might do the trick. Or burnin' splinters under yore fingernails."

Alarm leaped into Knabb's eyes. Then he sneered.

"Yuh ain't foolin' me," he muttered. "That'd get you gents in trouble with the law, and yuh know it. I got my rights."

"Mebbe so," Morgan admitted. "But I know a gent who don't worry none about trouble with the Law—and he knows how to make snakes like you rattle their buttons."

"Who's that?" Knabb was uneasy again.

"The Masked Rider!" Wayne Morgan said shortly.

Baldy Knabb started, licked his lips. It was obvious that he had heard of the famous Robin Hood rider, probably knew that he was somewhere in the basin at this very moment.

"Yuh—yuh wouldn't do that," he muttered.

"Wouldn't I?" Morgan laughed drily. "It'd be a pleasure! And believe me, hombre, yuh'll be glad to let yore tongue come unhinged before the Masked Rider's through with yuh—if yuh've got a tongue by then! Reckon I'll hunt him up."

He started for the door.

"Wait!" Knabb said desperately, and Morgan stopped, turned around.

"I reckon I'll get life for this anyway," the bald man mumbled. "So there's no use me gettin' tortured by that masked devil. I'll tell who hired me."

"Spit it out then!"

"It was Cort Lash!"

A sharp exclamation of horror came from Jan's lips. Thor, who had sat down on the bed, swore softly. Morgan said nothing, nor did his expression change.

"He's lying!" the girl cried fiercely. "I know he's lying! Cort wouldn't do a thing like that. He loves me, and I love him!" She held out her hands to Morgan appealingly. "Why would he want my father killed?"

Morgan did not answer her.

"Hombre," he said to Knabb instead, "it's not too late to turn yuh over to the Masked Rider. If yuh're lyin', yuh'd better change yore tune pronto!"

"Yuh asked me a question and I answered it," Knabb flared. "I don't give a cuss whether yuh believe me or not! I wouldn't have anything to gain by lyin'."

"Except maybe that you hate Cort for beating you up and firing you," Jan said. "You want to get him in trouble."

KNABB shrugged, remained silent. Wayne Morgan was thinking swiftly.

Maybe Knabb was lying, maybe not. At any rate, Morgan chose to let matters stand as they were for the present.

"Thor, can yuh stand a buckboard ride?" he asked abruptly.

"Why—why, I reckon so," the rancher said in surprise. "Why?"

"I think you and Jan had better go into town," the cowboy explained. "This business with Knabb here is shore proof that somebody's out to get yuh. So yuh'd be safer in town. Yuh could take rooms at the hotel and stay there till this mess is cleared up."

"Mebbe yuh're right," Kemp Thor agreed doubtfully. "What do you think, Jan?"

Jan shrugged her slender shoulders helplessly. There were tears in her blue eyes.

"Anything you say," she agreed. "Only I won't believe Cort is behind this. I won't! Oh, if we could only do something!"

"I think we can leave that to the Masked Rider," Morgan said grimly. "I think he'll clear this up—and pronto! Now I'll just tie this jasper up. Then, Jan, you get together what things you two'll need, while I hitch a team to the buckboard."

The preparations did not take long, and in a short time all four of them were headed toward Roaring Horse. Knabb lay in the back of the buckboard, secure-

ly trussed. Jan drove the team, while her father was propped on the seat beside her. Morgan rode close behind on the roan.

The events of the night had been clearcut, seemingly decisive. Yet there was doubt in Morgan's mind. Usually, a man's admission that another man had hired him to do murder was reason enough to cause the arrest of the man accused of instigating the crime. Maybe, Morgan thought, Cort Lash ought to be arrested and jailed.

Yet, on a sudden impulse, he had suggested to Kemp Thor and Jan that for the time being they hold Knabb's confession a secret among themselves. Jan had eagerly agreed, Kemp Thor somewhat reluctantly. If Knabb chose to repeat his charge to the sheriff, there was nothing they could do about it.

It was still relatively early when they reached town. Lights still glowed in the saloons, and Sheriff Sam Crews was in his office. They stopped before the office, and Morgan untied the prisoner's feet and hustled him inside without the town being aware of what was happening. It would not be long, though, before the garrulous sheriff would spread the news.

"Tried to 'bush yuh, did he?" said the paunchy little lawman, after explanations had been made. "Now, why'n tunket would he want to do that?"

Nobody bothered to expound their theories.

"I'll lock the skunk in a cell," Crews declared pompously. "Can't allow such goin's on in my county. I'll see he gets a fair trial, but he'll likely be hung!"

Leaving the sheriff with his prisoner, the Thors and Wayne Morgan crossed to the town's one hotel, a two-story structure. While Kemp and Jan Thor secured adjoining rooms, Morgan took the roan and the buckboard team to the livery. That attended to, he went along the fog-dimmed street and into the Staghorn Saloon, over which were Doc Lee's offices. It was almost midnight, but the place was still fairly well crowded.

Doc Lee stood at the bar, a drink of bourbon before him, talking to Craig Shannon. The chunky medico saw Morgan as he crossed the room, smiled, and beckoned to the tall waddy. Shannon was also smiling at him in friendly fashion.

"Have a drink, cowboy," Doc Lee invited.

Morgan nodded agreeably. "Rye," he said to the bartender.

"Decided on an outfit to work for yet?" the medico asked as they drank.

Morgan shook his head. "Been kind of puttin' it off. Stopped by Kemp Thor's Eighty-eight today, but they didn't need a hand."

"Why not try the Crescent?" Shannon suggested. "I can always use a tophand."

"Mebbe I'll do that," Wayne Morgan replied.

The batwings flapped and Sheriff Sam Crews came pompously into the saloon. He waddled to the bar, his fat face plainly showing its excitement and the importance of the news he carried, and ordered whisky. He gulped a swallow, then, as he turned to face the room, his glance touched Wayne Morgan.

"He won't get out of that cell!" he said loudly.

The attention of everybody in the room was centered on the paunchy sheriff.

"Who won't get out of what cell, Sam?" Doc Lee asked.

"Baldy Knabb!" said Crews. "I've got him locked up and aim to charge him with an attempted killin'!"

THERE was a hum of surprised talk in the saloon. Wayne Morgan saw the quick interest that showed on Craig Shannon's face. But Doc Lee's square features remained calm and smooth.

"Baldy Knabb," the doctor murmured. "Always in trouble. What is it now?"

"Accordin' to Kemp and his girl, and this cowboy here,"—the sheriff jerked his head at Morgan—"Baldy shot through Kemp's ranchhouse window and tried to kill him. They caught Baldy cold and brought him into town, and I locked him in a cell."

Doc Lee and Shannon were looking curiously at Morgan now.

"That right, Morgan?" Doc asked quietly.

"That's right," Morgan said.

"Then why didn't Baldy hit Thor?"

"Knabb made a mistake," Morgan said. "What he took for Kemp wasn't him." He didn't elaborate.

Doc Lee shook his head worriedly. "It's plain that somebody wishes Kemp Thor

and his daughter harm," he said. "They shouldn't be out there at the ranch alone."

"They're not," Morgan told him. "They came into town, and have rooms at the hotel."

"Baldy Knabb ought to be hanged," Doc Lee said soberly. "It's not likely, though, that he's personally to blame for all the deviltry that's happened in the basin. He must have been in the employ of somebody. Have you tried to make him talk, Sheriff?"

"'Course I have." Crews bristled indignantly. "Yuh think I don't know my business? But he closed up like a clam."

"Baldy's last job was with Cort Lash, wasn't it?" somebody asked.

Morgan spoke up quickly.

"But I hear Lash beat him up and fired him."

"That's so," Doc Lee agreed. "Give the devil his due, although that might have been a blind. Morgan, did you get anything out of Baldy?"

"I figgered that was the law's job," Morgan said.

Not long after that, Morgan left the saloon. He had debated with himself whether to return to his own camp and Blue Hawk, and decided against it. Instead, he ambled along the foggy street and turned in at the hotel. He roused the fat, sleepy-eyed clerk and asked for a room.

"I'd like to have one close to Kemp Thor's if possible," he said. "Thor's my boss."

The clerk yawned, nodded, and accepted Morgan's two dollars. Then he took up a bunch of keys and ascended a stairway at the back of the lobby, followed by Morgan. At the stairhead they went along a corridor that was flanked on both sides by doorways, and dimly lighted by a single lamp bracketed to the wall.

The clerk opened a door that was almost directly across from one which he explained was occupied by Kemp Thor. Thor's room was quiet and dark, and Morgan assumed the wounded rancher was asleep.

The tall cowboy, left alone, washed his face and hands in a basin of water, then lay down fully dressed except for his boots. His gun-belts lay on the bed beside him. When there was thinking to be done, he thought, shrewdly and penetratingly; when he needed sleep badly, as now, he slept.

And so he fell asleep almost immediately.

CHAPTER XI

Death in a Cell

ROARING HORSE sprawled dark and quiet in the clammy grip of the mist, with all the saloons long since closed, when a skulker crept from the back end of the alley beside the jail. He inched along the wall of the building that housed the jail and the sheriff's office, almost invisible in the shadows and fog, pausing every few feet to listen.

Once his foot struck an empty can. The sound seemed thunderous in the silence, and the prowler turned as if to flee.

But apparently nobody else had heard the racket, so after a short pause, he continued on along the wall. At the back of the jail was a single, barred window. The skulker paused beneath it, softly tapping on the wall.

He could make out light footsteps inside the cell, then heard a sound at the window above.

"That you, Baldy?" the prowler whispered hoarsely.

"Yeah. I'd about decided yuh wasn't comin'."

"I had to wait till everybody closed up and went home."

"Yuh got the gun?" Baldy whispered.

"And a hoss, saddled and waitin' for yuh out back of Lige Bean's store," the man beneath the cell window whispered back. "Soon as I'm gone, yuh can call the sheriff from his office where he's asleep. Better knock him on the head after he opens the door. And listen here! This basin ain't healthy for you no more. Better get clean out of the country."

"That'll take money," Baldy said. "Yuh got my pay?"

"Yeah—though I shouldn't give it to yuh, yuh dumb ox, after the way yuh bungled!"

"Try doublecrossin' me," Baldy snarled, "and I'll spill all I know!"

"Yeah, I guess yuh would. Here's the money, then, and the gun. Reach down

and take 'em."

Baldy Knabb thrust his arm eagerly through the bars.

* * * * *

Wayne Morgan awoke suddenly. He lay staring into the pitch darkness, not knowing what had awakened him, aware of the deep silence. There seemed to be no sound in all the town, and yet he knew that something had jarred him from a sound sleep.

He dropped his bare feet to the floor, feeling on the bed beside him for his gun-belts. Strapping the belts about his waist, he got silently to his feet.

He tip-toed to the door of his room and opened it a crack. The bracketed lamp at the far end of the corridor had been turned down low, and the hall lay in deep shadows. It was empty, quiet. Morgan could see nothing amiss.

He frowned, puzzled—then suddenly stiffened.

He was absolutely certain that when he had gone to bed that Kemp Thor's door had been tightly closed. Yet now the door to Thor's room stood slightly ajar!

He stepped into the corridor and silently crossed to Thor's room, where he paused, listening. He could hear the deep, regular breathing of a man inside the dark room. He thought, although he wasn't sure, that he heard a boot scrape against the floor. He felt a prickling along his spine, and the fog that came into the building was like a clammy hand.

He pushed open the door and stepped into the room, pausing just inside. At first he could hear nothing, see nothing. Then, in the dimmest of light glows that came through the window across the room, he saw a dark bulky figure stooping over the bed where Kemp Thor lay.

"What yuh doin' there, hombre?" Morgan said harshly. "Get away from that bed!"

The shadowy figure whirled about, with an animal-like snarl. Wayne Morgan leaped toward him.

The man lunged toward the window, trying to escape. But Morgan leaped at him, seized him about the body and flung him against the wall. As he recoiled from the wall, Morgan grabbed him again.

The man tried to tear himself away, but Morgan hung on, butting his head savagely up under his assailant's chin. He heard the prowler grunt with pain. The fellow brought his knee up in a wicked blow at Morgan, and swung a short, chopping blow at the cowboy's body.

Sensing that the fellow had a knife, Morgan released him, and flung himself backward. The back of his legs struck the bed and he sprawled backward over it—across Kemp Thor, who was swearing and shouting questions. As he fell across the bed Morgan felt something snag his shirt sleeve, then rip loose.

AS HE struggled to his feet, he saw the prowler's swift-moving shadow, heard the rushing pound of his boots against the floor. He snatched out one of his guns and fired, but knew he had missed.

Then there was a splintering of glass, as the prowler slammed through the room's one window. Morgan gained his feet and lunged across to the window, which opened into an alley.

The alley was dark and apparently empty, but Morgan heard the receding thud of footsteps into the foggy night, at its far end. He knew that pursuit would be hopeless now. He turned back, struck a match and applied it to a lamp.

Kemp Thor was sitting on the side of the bed, a gun in his hand, his expression puzzled and angry.

"You, Morgan!" he said wrathfully. "What in tarnation's happenin' here?"

Then Jan ran into the room, a robe about her slender figure. Fear was in her eyes.

"Are you all right, Father?" she cried.

"I'm fine," Thor declared. "But I still don't *sabe* what happened. I woke up, and it seemed like the room was full of fightin' wildcats!"

Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside, and excited voices. Curious faces showed at the door.

"What in blazes is goin' on here?" the fat clerk demanded. "I heard a shot. Somebody go get the sheriff!"

"Yuh won't need the sheriff," Morgan assured him, with a sheepish grin. "I was havin' a nightmare and dreamed I'd tangled with a whole gang of rustlers. I busted out that window with a chair."

The men in the corridor stared at him with open doubt, but they had to be satisfied with the explanation because the

tall cowboy gently closed the door in their faces.

Then, briefly, he explained to Kemp Thor and Jan what had happened.

"He meant to kill Daddy, I know he did!" Jan exclaimed. "Oh, where can he be safe?"

"I don't suppose yuh recognized him?" Morgan said to Thor.

"How could I?" the rancher asked testily. "I was asleep. First thing I knowed was when somebody tumbled over me. You saw the murderin' skunk. How about you?"

"He was just a shadow," Morgan answered as he shook his head. "But a shadow with a knife, or something." He looked fixedly at the small rent in the sleeve of his gray shirt, then he asked, "How about this scar-faced puncher of Shannon's, the one named Ike?"

"Ike Parrot?" repeated Thor. "Why, he's one of the riders Shannon hired after he took over the Crescent. Most of the old ones that had been with Dave Shannon are gone—fired by Craig or just pulled out. I reckon old Jubilee Boone's about the only one of the old bunch that's left. But wait a miunte, Morgan! Shorely yuh don't think Shannon had anything to do with this?"

"I didn't say that," Morgan replied enigmatically. "Anyway, I don't think we'll have any more trouble tonight. We might as well get some sleep."

"I won't close my eyes!" Jan declared vehemently. "I intend to stay right here, and keep the lamp burning. And tomorrow we'll find a safer place to stay."

"All right," Morgan agreed. "That might be a good idea. My room's just across the hall. I'll sleep light and keep my door open. See yuh early in the mornin'."

He crossed to his room and again lay down on the bed. But now it lacked only a couple of hours until dawn, and he had no intention of going to sleep. The night's events had kindled a slow, steady-burning anger inside him. He had made progress —was, in fact, almost certain of his man. But the man he had sworn to protect and gain justice for—Kemp Thor—had almost died.

For in his mind was not the shadow of a doubt that the prowler in Kemp Thor's room had been there to kill him. . . .

MORGAN must have dozed, after all, for he was suddenly aware that daylight was filtering through the window. He also was aware of excited voices in the street below.

He sat up, hurriedly pulled on his boots, strapped on his gunbelts and went to the window. A small knot of men stood before the sheriff's office and jail, Sheriff Sam Crews among them. The paunchy sheriff was talking and gesticulating excitedly.

Dr. Caleb Lee was hurrying along the plank walk. When he reached the knot of men, he spoke briefly to the sheriff, then went inside, followed by Sheriff Crews and the others.

Wayne Morgan went out, down the stairs, and crossed the street to the jail. He went through the sheriff's empty office and along a corridor to the cells at the back of the building. He could hear voices there.

The dozen or so bystanders he had seen were silent now, staring into the cell where Doc Lee bent over a motionless figure on the floor. Baldy Knabb!

After a brief examination, the doctor straightened.

"Been dead for several hours," he said.

"That's how I found him when I brought his breakfast back a few minutes ago," Crews declared. "Some skunk must of sneaked up to the window and shot him!"

"Wasn't you sleepin' up in yore office?" somebody asked. "Yuh'd have heard the shot."

"Baldy Knabb wasn't shot," Doc Lee declared quietly. "And he wasn't stabbed. He died of snake bite!"

There were murmurs of amazement and unbelief.

Doc Lee had pulled up Knabb's sleeve, and now he pointed. The dead man's arm was swollen to twice its normal size. And, just above the wrist, there were two angry, purplish dots surrounded by a greenish-red tinge.

"A rattler bit him!" a spectator muttered.

"Then likely the cussed varmint's still in here!" cried another. "Let's have a look—but be careful!"

Morgan had entered the cell. He had a brief, though careful, look at Baldy Knabb's arm. He had seen snake bite before. There was no doubt about how

Knabb had died. Morgan's eyes were cold and thoughtful as he watched the men search the cell.

But, although they tore apart everything that might have concealed a rattler, they found nothing.

"Say, come to think of it," exclaimed one of the searchers, "how would a rattler get in here?"

"A sidewinder, a small one, could have crawled through that crack over there," Morgan said quickly. He pointed to a corner of the cell where a portion of a plank had rotted away, leaving a crack in the floor perhaps an inch wide.

"Plenty big for a sidewinder," muttered the sheriff. "I been aimin' to nail a board over that crack. Now it's too late for pore Baldy."

"Pore Baldy, my grandma!" snorted a puncher. "Saves the county the expense of a trial. Only thing, now he can't tell who it was hired him to bushwhack Kemp Thor!"

Wayne Morgan left the cell and went outside. His face was grim in the early morning sunlight. Now, more than ever, he realized the ruthlessness and devilish cunning of the men he was fighting.

He went back to the hotel and told Thor and Jan what had happened.

"Bit by a rattler!" Thor exclaimed. "That's three lately—this dude, Hartley, Dave Shannon, and now Baldy Knabb! How'd the critter get into the cell?"

Morgan told about the crack in the floor.

"I'm ridin' out," he said then. "I likely won't be seein' yuh for a day or two. Yuh know any place where you two can go—a safe place?"

"We'll go out to Uncle Ben Herendeen's ranch—he's Mother's brother—and stay," Jan said. "He's got a big bunch of riders and I think we'll be safe and free from worry there."

Wayne Morgan said good-by, and left Roaring Horse. After two hours, when he was riding along the creek, he gave the mountain lion cry and was answered by Blue Hawk.

"The showdown, Senor, is not far off, no?" the Yaqui said after Morgan had related the events of the past night.

"That's right, Hawk," Morgan declared grimly. "Mebbe before the sun rises again justice will come to Big Misty Basin!"

CHAPTER XII

Beef—and Bullets!

UNOBTRUSIVELY the half dozen riders slid like ghost horsemen out of the fog, seeming to materialize from nowhere. They went methodically about their work.

A small herd of Crescent cattle were grouped in a pasture half a mile south of the ranchhouse. The riders circled them, silent except for the hiss of their ropes as they flailed the sleek rumps of the cattle. Finally they got the herd strung out and headed south.

They had gone less than a quarter of a mile, though, when there was a wild clatter of hoofs behind them, and another group of riders swept out of the fog. At the head of this group was Craig Shannon. Besides Shannon, hunched low in his saddle, was the warped figure of old Jubilee Boone.

"There the thievin' snakes are, makin' off with that herd of pure-breds!" Shannon yelled. "I figgered that bait'd bring 'em out of their holes. Let 'em have it!"

His gun blasted, boring a red hole in the foggy night.

The rustlers immediately whirled their horses to face the attackers. Instead of fleeing, they plainly meant to fight. Some of them mingled with the cattle, making shifty, elusive targets. Their guns started blasting.

Shannon's riders, surprised at the rustlers' stand, veered away. They swept on past, made cautious by the bullets snarling about them. The cattle were milling, beginning to turn like a giant pinwheel.

Red streamers of flame set the night ablaze, glowing like witches' fires in the mist. Men yelled, lead screamed, and snarled. But apparently nobody had been hit as yet.

Suddenly two other horsemen plunged out of the fog, almost directly into the path of fire. One was a masked, black-clad figure mounted on a coal-black stallion. The other, an Indian, was mounted on a gray. They halted, as if uncertain which was rustler and which was honest man. The great black reared, ears flat-

tened, pawing the air.

In the Masked Rider's hands were twin black six-shooters. Blue Hawk clutched a Winchester.

"The Masked Rider!" a voice cried. "Cut him down!"

Gunfire ripped the night again. Both groups were firing. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk heard the wicked snarl of lead about them.

But the Robin Hood rider had his bearings now. He swerved Midnight and, followed by Blue Hawk, faded back toward Shannon's group. The two could see the shadowy, elusive targets of the rustlers among the cattle, outlined in the gunpowder torches as they fired.

The Masked Rider's black guns blazed and roared, and a raider's horse reared and threw him. The raider's head showed briefly above the cattle as he tried desperately to keep his feet, then he vanished.

Perhaps a score of men were firing wildly, making the night hideous with sound, and weirdly beautiful with flowerlike bursts of gunflame. The cattle bawled, and men cried out stridently.

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk were close to Shannon's men now.

"Now's the time, Shannon!" the masked man yelled. "They're outnumbered. Charge 'em!"

But Shannon didn't give the order to charge.

"Hold off—hold off!" he shouted. "No use in gettin' a lot of men killed!"

The Masked Rider felt a sudden sharp pain in his arm, between the elbow and the shoulder, and knew he had been slightly wounded. But he ignored the injury.

He heard Blue Hawk's rifle bellow beside him, heard a man in Shannon's group cry out hoarsely, then sway drunkenly in the saddle before tumbling to the ground.

"Hawk," he said to the Yaqui sharply, "yuh're makin' a mistake. These men are not the rustlers!"

"This hombre, Senor," Blue Hawk said calmly, "was about to shoot you!"

As the Masked Rider well knew, the Yaqui never lied, and seldom made mistakes. The black-clad man swung toward Shannon's riders, who were almost invisible in the curling mists. But leaping red flames from their guns were plainly visible—and there was nothing ghostly about the angry snarl of lead about the heads of the Masked Rider and his Indian companion.

WITH sharp anger, he realized that in this fight he and Blue Hawk had no friends on either side. Both Shannon's punchers and the raiders were trying to cut them down!

"Out of here, Hawk!" he ordered. "We'll let 'em fight it out!"

They reined their horses around and raced back the way they had come, followed by seeking fingers of lead. They vanished into the deep, moon-shot fog whose thickness seemed to break as they cut their way through it. Almost immediately, the gunfire slackened behind them.

It was not the Masked Rider's way to run away from a fight. He was not running away from one now. But with both sides gunning for the scalps of Blue Hawk and himself, there just wasn't any sense in taking chances.

Two hundred yards from the herd they drew to a halt. As the Masked Rider had expected, there was no pursuit. The firing now had died to an occasional shot.

"Shannon's got 'em outnumbered," said the masked man. "The fight's about over. Rustlers won't stand up against odds."

Within another minute the firing had stopped entirely. Off in the mist they heard the sound of galloping hoofs, receding. Then Shannon's riders passed close in the fog, so close that they could see an inert figure dangling over a saddle.

"Jubilee's bad hit!" one of the riders said. "Mebbe he's already dead."

The Crescent men rode on into the fog, toward the ranchhouse, the hoofbeats of their horses rapidly dying away.

"What now, Senor?" Blue Hawk asked.

"I'm goin' to pay Shannon a visit," the Masked Rider said slowly. "I want to see how bad this Jubilee Boone is hurt, and find out what this was all about."

"But Senor!" the Yaqui protested, in quick alarm. "You saw that Shannon hates the Masked Rider and wishes to kill him. There would be too many, even for both of us to fight!"

"I won't be huntin' a fight—and I'll go as Wayne Morgan," the masked man said. "Shannon was plumb friendly toward

Wayne Morgan the last time they met."

"I will go with you?" asked the Yaqui.

"Only part of the way. I don't figger on any trouble."

They proceeded slowly toward the ranch buildings, unseen in the fog. When they came up against a peeled-pole corral, they stopped. Directly ahead bulked the ranch buildings. A light glowed in the bunkhouse, and in a room of the ranchhouse.

Quickly the Masked Rider removed the black cape and domino mask.

"Wait here," he instructed Blue Hawk. "I won't be gone long."

He strode toward the ranchhouse. Two punchers stood on the wide porch, talking in low tones. Evidently they mistook Morgan for a Crescent puncher, for they only glanced at him as he stepped past them and into a hallway. To his right was a lighted room, and he stepped quickly through the doorway.

A gnarled, white-mustached oldster, whom he correctly guessed to be Jubilee Boone, lay on a bed. The front of the oldster's shirt was blood-soaked. His eyes were closed and his breathing was harsh, ragged.

Craig Shannon stood beside the bed, staring down at the old cowhand. As Morgan entered, the Crescent owner turned quickly. Surprise flared in his eyes as he saw who it was. His hand dropped to his gun and his lips turned downward at the corners.

"How'd you get in here, cowboy?" he asked harshly.

"Why, I just walked in," Morgan said mildly. "Nobody tried to stop me."

"Where'd yuh come from?"

"Out there," Morgan remarked calmly. "I was takin' a short-cut to town when I heard gunshots. Figgered somebody was tanglin' with rustlers, so I headed this way. Looks like I was too late though." His eyes flicked at the wounded oldster. "What happened?"

Shannon's hand fell away from his gun and some of the tension left his body.

"Sorry I spoke so rough, Morgan," he said gruffly. "I'm suspicious of everybody lately. Yeah, it was rustlers. Tried to drive off a herd of pure-breds I had over in a pasture. Fact is, I'd left 'em there as bait, hopin' the killin' sons would show their hands. They did, and we'd mebbe have wiped 'em out if that cussed Masked Rider and the Injun with him hadn't showed up and sided 'em. They got away in the fog. All but one. He's dead. Down at the bunkhouse."

"Know him?" asked Morgan.

"Nope." Shannon shook his head. "That is, the cattle trampled him up too bad to tell. And the skunks got old Jubilee. Reckon he's goin' to die."

"Anybody gone for a doctor?"

"Not yet. I will, though."

MORGAN crossed quickly to the bed, bent over the old man and pulled aside his soaked shirt. The bullet wound was high on the right side of the scrawny chest. It was ugly, and was still bleeding badly.

Wayne Morgan had a considerable knowledge of first-aid. He had seen many bullet wounds. Now he knew that this wound was bad, but not necessarily fatal.

Old Jubilee had opened his eyes. They were dull, as if some of the fog had got into them, and bewildered. He stared up at Morgan, and gradually the eyes cleared, as memory returned. Craig Shannon was standing behind Morgan, in such a way that Jubilee couldn't see him.

Jubilee tried to speak, failed, tried again.

"Who're—you?" he whispered.

"Name's Wayne Morgan. Just take it easy, old-timer. Yuh'll be all right."

Jubilee shook his head painfully.

"Got somethin'—say—" he moaned.

"Let it wait. I'll fix yuh up."

"Say it—now." The oldster wet his dry lips. There was something dark and bitter in his eyes, something desperate and pleading. "Rustlers—they didn't—ain't—" He stopped again, a rough cough making his wiry body shiver.

Shannon stepped up beside Morgan. He had a whisky bottle in his hand.

"Save it a few minutes, old-timer," he said gently. "Here, take a snort of this and it'll make yuh feel better. Then I'll patch yuh up."

He uncorked the bottle and held it out to Jubilee. The old cowhand gulped a couple of swallows, sighed, and closed his eyes.

"I'll need hot water," Morgan said. "And clean cloths for bandages."

"Water's already heatin'," Shannon said.

"I'll get the bandages. One of my riders out at the bunkhouse has a bullet in his shoulder. He'll need fixin' up until Doc Lee gets here."

Shannon went into an adjoining room. The wounded puncher at the bunkhouse, Morgan guessed, was the one Blue Hawk had shot. He started cutting away Jubilee's shirt. The oldster's eyes were still closed, his breathing slow, labored.

When Shannon returned with white cloths in his hands, Wayne Morgan was standing beside the bed. His eyes were grim as he looked at the Crescent owner.

"We won't need the bandages now," he said. "Jubilee's dead!"

CHAPTER XIII

Boot Hill Medico

JAW dropping with surprise, Shannon stopped short. Then he swore softly.

"I didn't know it was that bad," he muttered.

"Neither did I," Wayne Morgan said soberly. "He was old, though, and mebbe he just didn't want to live bad enough to keep on breathin'. I wonder what it was he wanted to say."

"Did seem like he had somethin' on his mind." Craig Shannon shook his head gravely. "Mebbe he knew he was about to die. He'd been with the Crescent a long time. He pulled me out of plenty scrapes when I was a kid, without sayin' anything about it to the old man. Jubilee was my friend when nobody else was."

"Did yuh recognize any of the raiders tonight?" Morgan asked abruptly.

"No, I didn't."

"Did one of 'em ride a hoss with three white stockings?"

"If there was a hoss like that I didn't see it," Shannon said, almost with regret it seemed. He was staring at Morgan's arm. "Yore arm's bleedin', Morgan. How'd yuh get that?"

Morgan had forgotten about the bullet scratch on his arm. Now he saw that the trickle of blood had soaked through his shirtsleeve.

"I got kind of excited when I heard them gunshots," he said, thinking quickly. "A limb scratched me when I busted through a thicket. Don't amount to anything. Well, there's nothin' else to be done here now."

Shannon had the whisky bottle in his hand again. He offered it to Morgan, and Morgan shook his head. Shannon started to raise it to his lips, then grimaced and lowered it untasted.

"Never like to drink alone," he said. "Besides, whisky wouldn't taste right after what's happened tonight."

"Better send a man after Doc Lee," Morgan suggested.

"I'll go myself," Shannon said. "The sheriff'll have to be notified, too. I'll ride out right now. I'd appreciate it if yuh'd kind of patch up Jess Rusey. He's the puncher that's hurt and lying in the bunkhouse. Here's the bandages. They'll have hot water."

Morgan walked out into the night. He went to the bunkhouse and entered. A round-faced blond puncher lay on a bunk. His body was bare from the waist up, and there was a bullet wound high in his shoulder. Half a dozen other silent, hard-eyed Crescent riders were in the room.

Morgan nodded to them curtly.

"Shannon sent me to patch up this gent," he said. "Bring me some hot water."

He completed the task with dispatch, then walked out without speaking again. He skirted the corral and came to where Blue Hawk waited with the horses. Quickly he donned the cloak and mask, mounted, and they rode away from the Crescent.

"Any trouble, Senor?" the Yaqui asked.

"Not for me," the Masked Rider said grimly. "But an honest man has just died—and Wayne Morgan was offered a drink of poisoned whisky."

"Poisoned whisky! That is a strange thing, Senor."

"No stranger than many other things that have happened in this basin, Hawk. Of course, I can't be shore the whisky was poisoned, but I'd stake my life on it."

The masked man talked quietly for several moments as they rode along, giving his reasons for his conclusions.

"And the next step, Senor?" the Yaqui asked then.

"We ride to Roarin' Hoss. This wounded arm is paining me more and more. Mebbe we can catch Doc Lee before he

leaves for the Crescent. After that—"

The Robin Hood rider smiled grimly in the shadows. They rode at a steady, but unhurried gait through the mist-shrouded night toward the town of Roaring Horse. The weird gray world about them was quiet, seemed empty except for themselves. But both knew that evil was abroad in the fog, as deadly and rapacious as a prowling panther.

They talked little. The Masked Rider had made explanations, outlined his plan of action, so further words were unnecessary. Both men were tense, grimly eager to have this over with. These two, a white man and an Indian, kindred souls, staking their very lives so that right and justice might triumph over greed and evil. . . .

LIGHTS still glowed from doorways and windows as they entered the upper end of Roaring Horse's main street. Instead of continuing on along the street, they rode through a dark alley and stopped their horses in deep shadows behind a long row of buildings.

Still they spoke no word, but dismounted and went forward afoot through the deep shadows behind the buildings. Out on the main street they could hear voices, the thud of boots against a plank walk. A man yelled, high and stridently, but good-humoredly.

They entered the alley between the Staghorn Saloon and another building, moved along it and paused at the foot of an outside stairway. Light glowed at the front end of the alley, made dim and ghostly by the swirling fog. Loud, roistering voices sounded from the saloon.

The Masked Rider climbed the stairway, followed by Blue Hawk. In the Yaqui's hand was his Winchester.

At the top of the stairway was a closed door. The Masked Rider tested it, found it unlocked, and slid through into a hall that was dimly lighted by a wall-bracket lamp. Blue Hawk was close behind him as they went silently along the hall.

They paused before the door to Doc Lee's offices.

"Wait here, Hawk," the masked man said, and rapped gently on the door with his knuckles. He had already seen a glow of light under the door.

There was a moment of silence inside, then the sound of footsteps approaching the door. The door was opened, and blocky, square-faced Doc Lee stood there. Amazement showed in his pale eyes as he started at the black-garbed man.

"The Masked Rider!" he exclaimed. "You—I heard you were in the basin, but I must confess you startled me. And, to avoid misunderstandings, let me say that I don't hold with the tales I've heard about you. The stories, that is, that say you are a thief and cold-blooded killer."

"I'm glad to hear that, Doctor," the Masked Rider said slowly. "I wish more folks believed the same way."

"Well, come in—come in! What can I do for you?"

The Masked Rider stepped into the room. He looked quickly about. The room was simply furnished, containing a heavy desk, a thick-topped table that held numerous vials and surgical instruments. On another, smaller, table was a lamp. At one side of the room was a bookcase that held many thick volumes. On the opposite side of the room was a closed door that obviously opened into an adjoining room.

"Well, what can I do for you, Masked Rider?" the medico asked again, smiling. "Are you sick—or is this a social call?"

"Neither. But I've got a scratch on my arm I'd like yuh to patch up."

He rolled up his sleeve, exposing the shallow bullet slash on his muscular arm. Doc Lee looked at it wisely.

"Hm-m," he murmured. "When will men learn that violence and fighting settle nothing?"

"When some men learn that evil is black and can never mix with the white of right and justice," the Masked Rider said quietly. "Has Craig Shannon been here yet?"

"Why, no. Is he supposed to come here?"

"Rustlers raided the Crescent tonight," informed the Masked Rider. "A couple of men were killed. One was a rustler, the other was old Jubilee Boone."

Quick shock showed on the doctor's face.

"No! Was anybody else hurt?"

"A Crescent rider. Not bad, though."

"I'll head out there as soon as I attend to this wound of yours," said the medico.

Doc Lee had washed the dried blood from the masked man's arm. Now he

doused a piece of gauze with a brownish liquid from a bottle and started to douse it on the wound.

Suddenly the Masked Rider writhed away. Then he leaped forward, seized the doctor's wrist in a steel-like grip, twisted violently. Doc Lee grunted with pain, and a small object clattered to the floor with a metallic sound.

The Masked Rider shoved Doc Lee, and he staggered back against the desk. One of the masked man's guns was in his hand now, covering the medico. With the other hand he picked up from the floor the object Doc Lee had dropped.

"A mighty bad habit yuh've got, sawbones, of stickin' this contraption into people," he said harshly. "But somethin' tells me the epidemic of snake bite in this basin is about over!"

DOC LEE huddled against the desk, a little stunned by the violence of his contact with it. He stared with wide, pale eyes at the black-garbed man.

[*Turn page*]

"I Don't Like the Cut of Your Jib, Me Bucko—and I'm Rarin' Back on My Hind Legs to Say You Started that Fire!"

TOPPER McGRATH, the big woodsman, fairly barked out the words at Wayne Morgan. The Masked Rider listened coolly, wondering how best to meet the situation.

"You white-livered fire-bug!" spat out McGrath savagely, thinking that Wayne was eating crow.

"You're a liar, McGrath!" Wayne snapped.

Topper McGrath had been waiting for the go-ahead. He made a sudden leap at Morgan, who side-stepped like a tree-cat. Morgan's right hand moved so fast that none saw his lightning draw.

McGrath stopped his rush with the muzzle of Morgan's six-shooter making a dent in his chest. "Now you listen to me, wood-chopper," said Wayne. "I've got no quarrel with you. I didn't start that fire. Now you circle off and lay your hackles, or get yourself salivated!"

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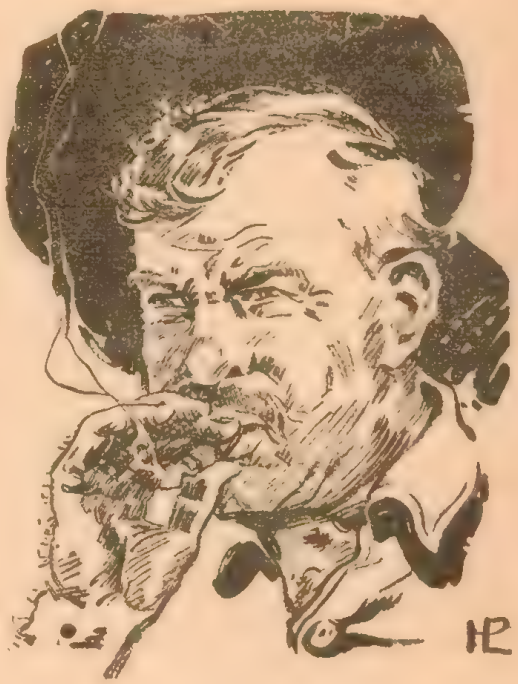

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FEATURED IN OUR NEXT ISSUE—LOOK FORWARD TO IT!

"Why did you do that?" he demanded. "What's wrong, Masked Rider?"

"You know what's wrong," snapped the black-clad man. "Yuh meant to stick this thing in my arm, didn't yuh?"

He held up the object. It was a small syringe with a pair of hollow steel needles attached. Inside the syringe was some kind of fluid.

"Certainly I meant to stick it into your arm!" Doc Lee said. "It contains a sedative to ease pain. Enough of it would put a man to sleep."

"One tiny drop of it would put a man to sleep—forever!" the Masked Rider spat at him. "The stuff in this syringe is what yuh killed the man, Hartley, with. It's what yuh killed Dave Shannon with six months ago—and Baldy Knabb, last night. It's pure rattlesnake venom!"

Dr. Caleb Lee's head drew down a little between his shoulders. His lips thinned, and his pale eyes began to glow with a cold-burning flame. He was a shrewd man, a cool man, wise enough to know the futility of enraged denial.

His lips twisted in a sardonic smile.

"So you know," he murmured.

"Enough to put a rope about yore neck!" the Masked Rider accused grimly. "Yuh killed Hartley, Dave Shannon and Baldy Knabb by injectin' snake poison into 'em with this syringe. Yuh tried to kill Kemp Thor in his hotel room with it last night—and almost killed that cowboy, Wayne Morgan, when yuh swung it at him in the dark. It's a slick doo-dad, all right. But it does looks like real snake bite, and the result is exactly the same."

"If it looks just like snake bite, what made you suspicious?" the medico asked, coolly curious.

"First, because them deaths were too pat. Second, because a couple of days ago I watched an hombre named Tonk Raven catch a big bull rattler alive and put it in a pail. Just the day before I'd seen this Tonk Raven leave yore office. Somebody wanted that rattler for a special reason. And what better reason was there than to get its poison? I was right shore that if Raven hadn't tried to bushwhack me, and forced me to kill him, he would have taken that bull rattler straight to you."

"Not bad!" Doc Lee was still smiling that cynical smile. "But hardly iron-clad enough for a conviction, I'd say."

"I'm not the law. I don't have to have iron-clad evidence to convict a man in my own mind. But, when Baldy Knabb was found dead in his cell this mornin' I was fairly certain he had not died of snake bite.

"Baldy was layin' on the floor, a considerable distance from the bunk. That means he was probably standin' up when he got that bite, and fell there. And a rattler, even a big one, wouldn't strike high enough to bite a man on the arm."

"Maybe it happened this way," the blocky medico said calmly. "Maybe somebody was afraid that if Knabb lived he would turn yellow and tell who had hired him to try to kill Kemp Thor. Maybe this somebody called Knabb to the cell window, with the pretense of slipping him a gun to escape with, someone who spoke in the lingo of a friend of Knabb's he was expecting. And then, when Knabb stuck his arm through the bars to take the gun, he was jabbed with that poison-filled syringe. Is that the way you'd figured it, Masked Rider?"

The masked man stared, astonished. He had, in fact, figured it in exactly the manner described by Doc Lee.

"Then yuh don't deny anything?" he demanded.

"Why should I? After all, knowing and proving are two different things."

"I don't figger it'll be hard to prove enough to send both you and Craig Shannon to the gallows," the Masked Rider said confidently. "Or rather, the hombre who calls himself Craig Shannon."

"What do you mean by that?" Doc Lee asked sharply.

"I mean the gent who's masqueradin' as the Crescent owner is not Craig Shannon, as you well know!"

CHAPTER XIV

Guns in the Dark

DOC LEE leaned back heavily against the front of the desk. Plainly the Masked Rider's last charge had taken him by surprise. His square face had lost its kindly appearance and his real nature showed behind the cold flame in his pale eyes.

"If he's not Craig Shannon, then perhaps you will tell me who he is," he sneered.

The Masked Rider shook his head.

"I don't know—yet. All I know is that he is not Craig Shannon. And that he is hand-in-glove with you in this devilish mess."

"Then what makes you think he's not Shannon?" persisted Doc Lee.

"Mainly because of somethin' Kemp Thor told this driftin' cowboy, Wayne Morgan, and Morgan told me," the masked man declared. "Accordin' to Thor, Craig Shannon's chest is—or was—covered with knife scars. Scars he'd got in a fight with a gent named Johnny Bones before Craig left home over ten years ago.

"I know that knife scars, especially deep ones like Craig Shannon had, never disappear. Yet this hombre callin' hisself Craig Shannon hasn't got a single scar on his chest. I know, because in his fight with Cort Lash in the Staghorn a few days ago, his shirt was almost ripped from his body. Wayne Morgan was there, and he told me that."

"Careless of me," murmured the medico.

"How yuh mean, careless?"

"Let it go," Doc replied. "What else?"

"Why, this hombre seemed to know just about everything that happened to Craig Shannon before he left home. But when Wayne Morgan mentioned somethin' that *hadn't* happened—like him supposedly rescuin' Jan Thor from a flooded creek when she was a little girl—he got flustered. Then he claimed to remember it. That was another dead giveaway."

"Masked Rider, I wish I'd had you on my side," the medico said admiringly, ignoring his own predicament. "It was easy enough to fool the simple fools in the basin!"

"Somethin' else this fake Craig Shannon will answer for," the masked man went on, his deep voice grim and implacable. "I'm shore that raid on the Crescent tonight was as big a fake as Shannon is hisself. Shannon, or one of his riders, shot old Jubilee Boone, wantin' to get him out of the way because they was afraid he'd found out too much. But the shot failed to kill him, and they took him back to the ranchhouse. He was bad hurt but, accordin' to Morgan who dropped by sort of accidental, a long way from dyin'. Jubilee wanted to say somethin' awful bad, and Shannon seemed not to want him to talk. Then, just after Shannon gave him a drink of whisky, Jubilee died. Morgan was certain the whisky was poisoned, and I'll gamble he was right!"

Doc Lee ran his hand lightly along the edge of the desk, smiling slightly as though amused. But there was a wicked scheming in his eyes, a bitter, desperate hope for a way out.

"Those are pretty theories, Masked Rider," he sneered. "But only theories. What would be the motive behind such fantastic things? Men don't do things without motives, you know."

"I thought mebbe, seein' yuh're beaten, yuh'd tell me that."

The physician laughed. It was an ugly sound, matching the trapped-animal fury on his features, giving an insight into his real nature. The Masked Rider wondered how, at first sight of him, he had been fooled into thinking that Doc Lee was what he professed to be—a kindly soul, wanting only to do good.

"I could tell you that, Masked Rider," Doc Lee said. "But it wouldn't do you any good. For, you see, you'll never leave this room alive!"

It was the flamelike triumph in the man's eyes, rather than what he said, that warned the Masked Rider. He sent his powerful body curveting aside, sensing suddenly that death was behind him, flinging a glance over his shoulder toward the door at the back of the room.

He saw that the door to the adjoining room stood half-ajar, and out of the dark room Craig Shannon had come silently into this lighted one. The gun in his hand was already leveled, already spouting flame and smoke. Its report was thunderous in the Masked Rider's ears. But the bullet missed his hurtling body and slashed into the floor.

If he had been a breath later, he would have been a dead man. He hit the floor on his shoulder, rolled, and slammed violently against the legs of the heavy table.

DOC LEE had moved with incredible quickness. He had jerked open a desk drawer, rammed his hand inside. It came out clutching a slender-barreled .38. His wicked eyes aglare, he whirled toward the Masked Rider.

From where the masked man lay on the floor, he fired upward at the medico. Doc Lee staggered slightly, and with his left hand swept the lamp from the smaller table. The room was plunged into instant darkness.

But instantly the inky black was ripped apart by red tongues of flame from Shannon's gun. Then Shannon ran forward to where Doc Lee stood.

Off his feet, caught at a disadvantage, the Masked Rider acted quickly. Half under the heavy table, he reared straight up, catching the table with his shoulder and slamming it over on its side. Intentionally, he had overturned the table so that its legs were jammed against the wall.

He was between the table-top and the wall, between the four legs, so that it made a rude barricade.

He heard a scraping noise, as if something heavy were being pushed over the floor.

"Down, you fool!" he heard Doc Lee command. "He can't get away!" And he knew that the two had taken refuge behind the thick desk.

For seconds there was silence. Silence in the room—but pandemonium had broken loose in the Staghorn Saloon below. Men yelled questions and boots pounded on the stairs as others rushed toward the second story.

Likely some of Shannon's tough riders were among those pounding up the stairs. They would know that Shannon was in Doc Lee's office, and would try to come to his aid.

But Blue Hawk was in the hall outside, and in the Yaqui the Masked Rider had implicit faith. So long as Blue Hawk was alive no man would come through that doorway and into this room.

He raked a gunsight across the floor, and instantly twin tongues of flame licked across the room at him. Bullets slashed into the table before him. The churning flame blinded him, so that he could see nothing.

But as the gunfire slackened he rammed the barrels of his two guns over the table edge and hammered two quick shots at the desk.

Doc Lee's voice, calm, but wickedly triumphant, speared through the smoky silence that followed.

"Save your lead, Masked Rider! You'll never get out of here alive. You're the only man who knows our secret. It'll die with you—and we'll collect a bounty for saving our own hides!"

"Don't be too shore of that, sawbones," the Masked Rider said coldly. "If yuh want me, come and get me!"

The room exploded redly as the medico and Shannon slammed lead wildly at the table-top again.

Lead splintered into the wood, snarling its wicked, fiendish hymn of hate and death.

Flattened against the floor, the man in black slid sideward, snaked one of his sixes around the table edge. The six shots he poured into those churning flames before him made a continuous roar like the roll of giant drums.

One of those guns behind the desk stopped firing abruptly. The Masked Rider heard a man grunt, a low, tired sound, and then a dull thud like a body striking the floor.

The other gun stopped firing then, and a man cursed in a low, furious tone. It was Doc Lee's voice. Shannon, the Masked Rider guessed, was the man who had been hit. Or was it a trick?

In the momentary silence, he heard Blue Hawk's voice in the hall outside.

"Back, senores! No man enters that room!"

"Who's in there, and what's goin' on?" a rough voice demanded.

"The Masked Rider is there. And he fights the evil ones—the killers—who have brought terror to this range!"

"If it's the Masked Rider, then I'm on his side," still another voice declared, a voice which the masked man recognized as that of Cort Lash. "Hold yore fire, redskin. I'm comin' over there!"

There was a thud of bootheels.

"Careful, senor—behind you!" Blue Hawk said sharply.

His rifle crashed, and a man cried out.

"He was about to shoot you in the back, senor," the Masked Rider heard Blue Hawk say.

"Come on, you Crescent buckos!" a harsh voice shouted. "The boss is in there. Let's get to him!"

BOOTS pounded the floor again. A gunshot crashed. A dancehall girl screamed.

"Cort—be careful!" another girl's voice cried.

Amazement slapped at the Masked Rider. That was Jan Thor's voice. Jan, here! When she was supposed to be at her uncle's ranch.

Other guns roared in the hall, their thunderous detonations beating back from the walls and shaking the building.

"What now, sawbones?" the Masked Rider asked, jeeringly. "Yore pard's dead and yuh're alone. Ready to give up?"

Doc Lee's answer was a wild curse that held baffled rage and a hint of panic. Obviously he had reloaded his gun, for he started firing again, wildly, punctuating the shots with his venomous curses.

The masked man hugged the floor, counting the shots. The savage snarl of lead was close in his ears, the bitter smell of powdersmoke in his nostrils. The room blazed and leaped with a weird red light that gave it an infernolike appearance.

At the sixth shot, the Masked Rider came up from the floor like a spring uncoiling. He flung the table aside and leaped across the stygian-black room, going over the desk in a slashing, headlong dive. His shoulder struck Doc Lee's blocky body and drove the man to the floor.

The medico tried to writhe away. He fought the masked man, snarling in wicked fury like an animal, clawing, mauling, kicking. The Masked Rider clung to him with one hand, and slashed downward with the gun that was in the other.

The blow missed, and nausea rolled over him as his antagonist's boot slammed into his middle.

He recoiled, then drove back in, savagely, without mercy. The gun-barrel slammed downward again, and again, thudding solidly the second time.

Doc Lee suddenly grew limp, and lay still.

The Masked Rider got slowly to his feet. The loud, excited voices continued in the hall outside, but the gunfire had stopped. The black-clad man stood a moment in the darkness, getting control of his emotions, the tension leaving him. The fight was over.

He scratched a match and its flickering light dimly illuminated the room. Shannon lay sprawled on his face, and Doc Lee was on his back. Shannon was dead, while the medico was merely unconscious. He would live.

"Hawk!" the Masked Rider called.

The door was opened almost instantly, and the Yaqui stood in the opening, framed in the light from a lamp in the hand of a man just behind him.

"Senor!" the Indian exclaimed, deep anxiety in his voice. "I did not dare open the door. Are you—"

"All right, Hawk. How about out there?"

"It is over. One man is dead—a scar-faced hombre, named Sid Parrot, I think—and two others wounded. The others left."

"Good enough. They can be rounded up if they're wanted. We've got the two we was after. Bring in the light."

CHAPTER XV

The Masquerader

LIGHT appeared as the man with the lamp came into the room. A score of others crowded in behind him. They were honest men, the Masked Rider judged, townsmen and ranchers, some of whom had suffered at the hands of the raiders. Now they stared with wide, unbelieving eyes at the two men on the floor.

"Doc Lee and Craig Shannon!" one of them exclaimed. "Shorely yuh don't mean, Masked Rider, that they're the ones that have been behind all this deviltry?"

"That's just what I do mean," the Robin Hood rider said grimly. "Doc Lee had all of yuh fooled. As to this other hombre, he ain't Craig Shannon."

"Not Craig Shannon? Yuh must be loco!"

"Would any of you, who knew Craig Shannon before he left the basin, have recognized this gent as Shannon if yuh'd met him unsuspectin' on the trail?" the masked man demanded.

"Why, no, mebbe not," one of them said finally. "But Craig was only a youngster when he left, and ten years passed before he came back."

"You had only his word, and Doc Lee's, that he was Shannon," the masked man declared.

"And some papers and things," put in a rancher. "He satisfied a probate judge."

"He's not Craig Shannon," the Masked Rider said, with conviction. "He's a fake."

"Then who is he?" Several chorused that.

"I don't know. But I see Doc Lee is comin' out of it. Mebbe he'll clear up a few matters."

Doc Lee had opened his eyes. He sat up slowly, a bewildered expression on his blunt features. There was an awareness of final defeat in his pale eyes as he stared at the grim faces of the men hemming him, but those eyes also held a bitter contempt and defiance.

The Masked Rider's gaze, shifting over the room, paused on two people near the doorway—Cort Lash and Jan Thor. Lash had one arm about Jan's shoulders.

Sheriff Sam Crews came belatedly into the room, pushing his way importantly through the crowd.

"What's goin' on here?" he demanded. "What's all the fuss about? Can't allow such goin's on."

He paused, his fat jowls dropping as he saw the two men on the floor. Then his gaze shifted to the Masked Rider, and he tugged clumsily at his gun.

"I reckon this is yore doin's, Masked Rider!"

"Take it easy, Sheriff," a bearded rancher advised. "It's the Masked Rider's doin's, all right, and we all owe him thanks for it—if what he says is true. Shannon ain't in any shape to deny anything, but Doc Lee is. How about it, Doc?"

Blood was running down one side of Doc Lee's face. He got groggily to his feet, righted a chair, and sat down. Then he shrugged, smiling a twisted, cynical smile.

"Only fools deny the obvious," he said.

The Masked Rider picked up the twin-needled syringe from the floor and held it so everybody could see it.

"This syringe has snake poison in it," he declared. "When these needles are stuck into a man, and the venom injected, it's impossible to tell it from real snake bite. This is what killed the stranger, Hartley, on Kemp Thor's Eighty-eight land seven months ago. It's what killed Dave Shannon a month later—and Baldy Knabb only last night. As to what's behind it all, I'm in the dark almost as much as the rest of you." His gaze bored into Doc Lee. "You'll hang, sawbones, whether yuh talk or not. It's up to you."

Doc Lee looked up at the faces about him, his eyes behind the thick-lensed glasses hating them and despising them.

"Why not?" he drawled. "Mainly, it was silver."

The Masked Rider frowned. "Silver?"

"The man Hartley," the medico explained, as calmly as if he were talking about the weather, "claimed to be in bad health and needed fresh air. Really, he was a mineralogist from Denver. We became quite good friends. Where he made his mistake was in confiding to me that he had located a rich deposit of silver-bearing ore on the western part of Kemp Thor's Eighty-eight outfit. I decided to take advantage of it. And to do that, I had to gain control of the Eighty-eight.

"I knew Kemp Thor wouldn't sell. And obviously I, a respected physician, couldn't just run him off his land and take charge. The fact that Thor's range and Dave Shannon's Crescent outfit were adjoining tracts, gave me the answer."

THE masked man nodded, as it became plain.

"But first," he interrupted, "Hartley had to be put out of the way so he wouldn't reveal the secret."

"Precisely! It was a simple matter, and my verdict of death from snake bite wasn't questioned. My next step was to gain control of the Crescent. Fortunately, that also was simple, made so by the fact that old Dave Shannon and his wildling son had quarreled bitterly ten years before, the boy having left the basin and never returned. I knew that Craig Shannon was in Texas, however. And I knew that Dave Shannon had made a will, leaving everything to the boy. My next step was to get rid of Dave, so that the boy could come home and inherit the ranch."

"But the Masked Rider, here, says that gent on the floor ain't Craig Shannon," the bearded rancher grunted. "Reckon he's mistaken about that, huh?"

Admiration tinged the hatred in the medico's eyes as he looked briefly at the man in black.

"No, he wasn't mistaken. Quite by accident"—Doc Lee smiled sardonically—"I knew a man named Nick Balder, who was not, let us say, on congenial terms with the

law. Nick Balder was about Craig Shannon's age, and considerably like him in appearance. So after Dave Shannon's regrettable, and fatal, accident, I got in touch with Nick Balder. He agreed to go along with me—for a share in the profits, of course!"

"Then," said the Masked Rider grimly, as Doc Lee paused, "Nick Balder went to Texas. He found Craig Shannon, killed him, taking what identifyin' papers and other things Shannon had on him. Yuh'd already coached Balder, explainin' every important incident that had ever happened to Craig Shannon here in the basin before he left. Then Balder showed up, claimin' to be Craig Shannon—and got away with it."

"Exactly," repeated the medico. "It wasn't hard to fool the stupid fools on this range. I've been doing it for twenty years!"

The rest of Doc Lee's fantastic, but ingenious, scheme for gaining a rich rangeland empire was soon told. Nick Balder, as Craig Shannon, had quickly got rid of the honest punchers Dave Shannon had kept, with the exception of Jubilee Boone, replacing them with his own gang of toughs and wanted men.

Then they had begun a reign of terror in the basin. While these raids had brought rich reward, most of them had been as a blind for their primary goal—that of driving Kemp Thor from his land or, failing that, killing him. Then the Crescent would simply move in on the 88, gambling that nobody would consider it worth fighting a bloody range war for.

To avert suspicion from themselves, they had attempted deliberately to throw blame for the depredations on the outlaw's son, Cort Lash. As Wayne Morgan had guessed, the white-stockinged horse ridden by the rustler leader was a clever trick. The effect had been gained by smearing the gluey, snowwhite substance, made by mixing the sand about Soda Springs with water, over the legs and forehead of a solid-color horse. The pastelike stuff could easily be washed off.

In swearing that he had been hired by Cort Lash, Baldy Knabb had only been furthering the scheme, confident he would be rescued from jail.

The fake raid on the Crescent had been made by Balder's own men, for two reasons—to throw suspicion elsewhere, and to get rid of old Jubilee Boone who had begun to suspect that Balder was an impostor. The treacherous bullet failing to kill the oldster, Balder had given Jubilee a drink of poisoned whisky when the old foreman had seemed about to reveal his secret.

"Devilish slick," muttered a puncher, as the doctor finished.

"Slick enough," Doc Lee said, the acrid bitterness of defeat making his voice harsh and ragged, "to have worked—if it hadn't been for the Masked Rider! I'd have had what I've always wanted, what I finally did murder for—wealth. I'd have been king of an empire! I hope he burns in purgatory for his meddling!"

The Masked Rider paid no attention to Doc Lee's denunciation. He had eased through the crowd until he stood near Cort Lash and red-haired Jan Thor.

"After tonight, hombre, the trail ought to be a little easier for you," he said to Lash.

Cort Lash smiled.

"Easy or not, I'll follow it to its end," he said. "Because I won't ride it alone from here on."

His arm tightened about Jan.

The masked man said to Jan:

"Wayne Morgan told me you and yore father had gone to yore Uncle Ben's to stay until this was over."

"Father's out there." Jan smiled happily, tossing her red head. "But I had business in town. Cort and I were married an hour ago."

The Masked Rider smiled, his hand on Cort Lash's shoulder.

"I wish yuh lots of luck—all of 'em with red hair!"

The crowd, engrossed in Doc Lee and the dead man, hadn't noticed the Masked Rider's slow passage to the doorway.

"By gosh, it must of took a lot of slick brain-work to unravel this," one of the spectators remarked admiringly. "How'd yuh do it, Masked Rider?"

WHEN there was no answer, the men looked bewilderedly about the room. But the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk were gone. Nobody except Cort Lash and his pretty red-haired bride had

seen them leave, and those two remained silent.

"Went like he come—like a ghost," said the bearded rancher, in a hushed tone. "He won't be seen on this range ag'in, unless there's more trouble to be ironed out. But he'll be on some other range—fightin' like a demon, as he always does, on the side of right and justice!"

The room was abruptly quiet, as if in silent tribute. . . .

At that moment the Masked Rider and his Yaqui companion were passing the last straggling houses at the edge of Roaring Horse. The fog still swirled about them. But now it had lost that sinister, clammy feel that was like the clutch of dead hands. It flowed about them warmly, like the feeling inside them that came with the knowledge of another grim task well-done.

"Where to next, Senor?" Blue Hawk asked softly.

The man in black shrugged broad shoulders.

"Over the next hill, the next river, the next mountain. Wherever there's evil, and honest men are callin' for help against their oppressors. Where to? *Quien sabe?*"

They rode on, vanishing ghostlike into the fog. Behind them they left peace and justice and happiness. Ahead of them these same things were to be fought for and won in the bitter smoke of battle.

Bunkhouse Chatter

REMEMBER that a bronc can't be any more perfect than a human being. Looks are not the only thing to think about when buying a horse. Temperament is mighty important. These faults can become pretty irksome—balking, kicking, shying, rearing, backing, halter pulling, and biting.

In looking over the animal, study the conformation for faults of narrow chest, straight, short shoulders, shallow barrel, and long, weak couplings and loins; poorly developed muscles in the hind quarters, and weak, improperly formed feet and legs.

With that advice, it ought to be pretty easy for a tenderfoot to pick himself up a fine pony!

* * * * *

SHERIFFS were forbidden by outlaws and badmen to cross the Nueces River in Texas, back in the 1870s, when J. C. B. Harkness became the peace officer of Frio County. He disregarded the deadline and one by one he started running down his foes, until it wasn't long before the juries were not afraid to convict his prisoners and the law-abiding element began to rally to his aid.

What is most unusual about this great law officer of the early West is that he refused to his dying day to discuss the shooting scrapes that he won.

"Yes," he often told writers who interviewed him. "I knew the good and the bad characters of those days, such as Ben Thompson and his brother Billy Thompson, King Fisher and many others. But I don't want to talk about them. Let me tell you about how my friend, Big Foot Wallace, shocked my daughters one time at the dinner table by telling them how he fought a naked Injun all covered with bear grease!"

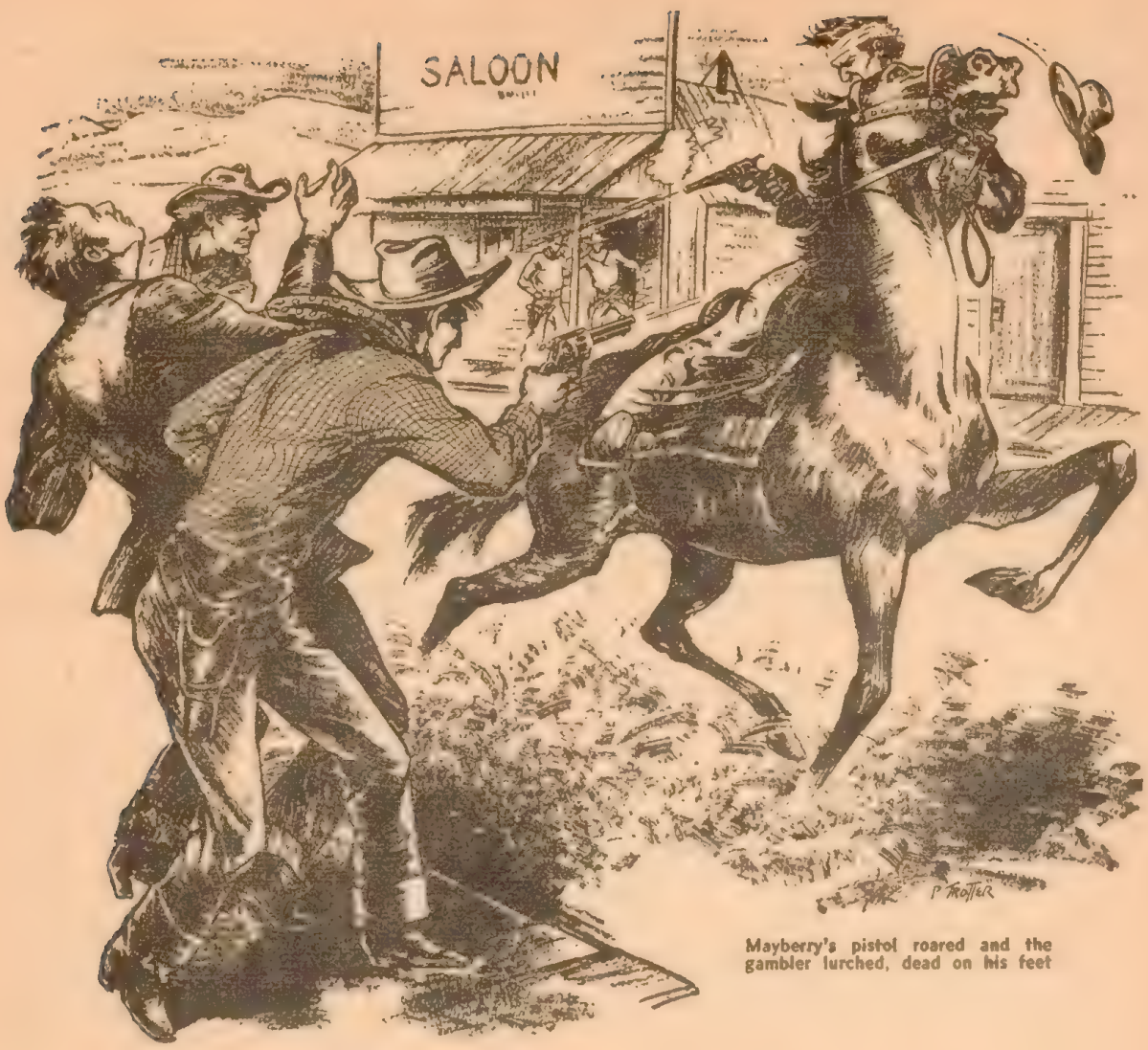
* * * * *

ACCORDING to the curator of reptiles at the museum in San Antonio, no snake can roll like a hoop. No snake stings with its tail. There are only four venomous snakes in the United States that are harmful to man On level ground a rattlesnake rarely strikes over two-thirds of its length. Snakes neither sting nor bite with their tongue.

Having no eyelids, snakes cannot close their eyes. Having no ears, a snake hears with its tongue. There is no glass or joint snake. The whip snake does not use its tail as a whip. Rattlesnakes do not always rattle before striking and do not have to be coiled before striking.

All venomous snakes do not have flat, triangular-shaped heads. The only sure way of determining a venomous snake is to examine its mouth for fangs. Rodents, insects, and other snakes form the main diet of snakes.

—Tex Mumford.



Mayberry's pistol roared and the gambler lurched, dead on his feet

RANGER FROM HELL

By LARRY HARRIS

After years in a Mexican jail Pete Mayberry returns to seek vengeance—but a surprise changes all his plans!

THE torrential downpour had held for three days and nights without a let-up. The fourth night it was still beating down upon the squalid 'dobe town of Mier. Mexicans, fearful lest a curse had been wrought upon them, hovered around the open mesquite-root fires in their *casas*, listening.

Outside thunder boomed, like cannonading, along the flooded Rio Grande. The narrow black lanes, deep with mud, with filth and garbage, were cluttered with rain-drenched burros and goats. Candlelight peeped dismally from the cracks of blanket-covered windows.

Suddenly, through the raging storm, struck the frantic beat of a horse's hoofs. From the direction of the river a rider

bolted through the night. Through the muddy, narrow streets he spurred, heading toward the military garrison on the plaza.

His stricken cry was like the voice of doom:

"The *Tejanos* are coming! To arms! Por Dios, General Woll has lost!"

From somewhere at the remote edge of the town lifted a growing turmoil, terrifying man-made sounds that rose above the storm. Doors burst open as Mexicans poured out into the streets. Clutching rifles, sabers, pistols, they ran toward the plaza, their curses and cries adding to the bedlam.

Rifle fire suddenly broke loose in a black lane. In the open plaza a small cannon roared. Figures flung themselves behind the cottonwood trees. From the sprawled 'dobe garrison charged *soldados* —Mexicans who only a few short months ago had suffered a galling defeat at San Jacinto.

"The *Tejanos!*" they shouted. "Kill the sons of dogs!"

Then, quite suddenly, into the main street came the attackers. On a tidal wave of killing passion they charged, shooting and yelling. Texans, mud-splattered and drenched, but fired by a deathless spirit of vengeance, riding to pay off a debt in blood. Texans, in whose minds the horrors of the Alamo were still fresh, riding like madmen, shooting, slashing, killing.

No human force could have stopped them. On foot and ahorse they swept into the plaza, their lusty bawls rising above the thunder of guns, the screams of the wounded and dying,

"Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!"

Then it was hand-to-hand fighting. Knives flashed in the stormy darkness and men fell to the mud. Pistols blared as Texans swarmed over the plaza. Texans—brush-poppers, plowmen, bullwhackers and trappers—were adding another bloody page to history!

AT THE barred window of the *juzgado,* a grizzled, sunken-eyed caricature of a man stared out at the spectacle. Both his bony hands gripped the iron bars. His ears throbbed with the din, but his hoarse cries were lost in the bedlam. Bullets smacked into the 'dobe wall around him.

"Texans!" he croaked. "Thank God!"

His eyes grew wet. His trembling legs gave way and he sank slowly to his knees like a man praying. There in the vile smell and filth of his vermin-infested cell he knelt, a hulking shell of a man. The battle sounds outside dimmed in his ears.

Then men's shouts echoed along the dank jail corridor. The gibberish cries of other prisoners rose like a mournful plaint. Lantern light flashed. Curses and laughter mingled with the joyful screams of the prisoners as cell doors swung wide.

A huge Texan, well over six feet, mud-splattered and bloody, inserted a key in the lock of the last cell door. Other men crowded around him with guns and lanterns. As he flung open the door a bellow of amazement came from his massive chest.

"Heaven's mercy, boys! An *Americano!*"

The crouched man got to his feet, his gaunt face working. His sunken eyes were feverish, staring, uncomprehending. His clothes were dirty rags. Native sandals covered his feet. He moved forward, shuffling and slow.

"Yes, I am an American," he said huskily.

"What's yore name, feller?" the big Texan boomed.

"Pete Mayberry."

"Hmm. How long yuh been caged up here, Pete?"

Pete Mayberry passed one bony hand across his eyes.

"I—I don't know. But it's been years—years—" His voice broke then. He was suddenly shaking as if with ague. "Years! Cuss 'em, I'll square things! I knew I'd live!"

He began babbling. The big Texan glanced at the other men, pointed to his own forehead.

"Take it easy, Pete," he advised. "Yuh'll be all right with a mite of grub under yore belt. Take care of him, Hank. Get him a gun, some clothes and grub. Then send him across into Texas."

Pete Mayberry let one of the men lead him out of the jail building. Most of the shooting had died out in the plaza. Texans, triumphant with victory, were scouring the town for any other display of resistance. The plaza was covered with

bodies, mostly Mexicans. The moans and cries of the wounded and dying was a ghastly requiem.

Pete Mayberry stared dully about him as he shuffled along beside the Texan. The wind and rain ruffled his shaggy gray hair. He still figured it was all a nightmare.

When they came to an empty 'dobe house the Texan told Mayberry to wait inside. A candle burned in the deserted front room. Mayberry sat down on a hidebound chair, near the fireplace. He laughed a little crazily when the Texan returned. Then a startled, wild look came into his eyes.

"I'm free, ain't I?" he cried throatily. "Tell me!"

The Texan tried to explain what had happened.

"We're part of the Army of Texas, old 'un—headin' fer Mexico City to take over the whole country. Been a lot happen since you been cooped up."

"It's been years," said Mayberry. "Years."

"Texas is a Republic now, old 'un," said the Texan. "We whupped the Mexicans at San Jacinto after they wiped us out at the Alamo. Now we're after their hides. Sam Houston is president of Texas and thunderation's a-poppin'. Colonel Bill Fisher is headin' us into Mexico. That there was Big Foot Wallace what took yuh out of the *juzgado*. Know him?"

Mayberry shook his head. "I come to Texas with Steve Austin and his colonists, years ago."

"Why, feller, that was fifteen years ago! How'd yuh live that long in that hole?"

"I had to live," Mayberry said slowly. "I made myself live. Yuh see, I got to kill a man."

After that Mayberry ate some of the food the man had fetched him. It made him a little sick. Then he put on the Texas jeans, jacket and boots that had been taken from a dead man. He strapped a five-shot Navy pistol about his scrawny waist.

"There's a hoss outside waitin' for yuh, old 'un," the Texan said grimly. "If I was you I'd grab it.and head for the river. Go upstream to the ford. That's where we crossed tonight. Yuh might head back for San Antonio and look up Cap Jack Hays. He's head of the Rangers now. He'll help yuh. Just tell him Hank Justine and Big Foot Wallace sent yuh."

PETE MAYBERRY rode out of Mier that night in the drenching downpour. At the ford he crossed the swollen Rio Grande, then he headed north over the hills and brushland. Some time near dawn he stopped, picketed his horse in a live oak motte. Trembling from exhaustion, he crawled beneath a shelving rock.

For a long time he lay there staring dully into the rainy darkness, like a man in a stupor. He kept telling himself he was free, but his mind was not clear. The torture of such a Mexican prison as that where he had been did things to a man. It had taken the flesh off of Pete Mayberry's six-foot frame. It had warped and twisted his brain, numbed him to all physical agony.

Only a man of steel and rawhide, like Pete Mayberry, could have endured the past fifteen years. Only a man driven by a mad, fierce obsession would have tried to live. Hate had kept him alive, despite the filth, rotten food and disease—a consuming, soul-searing hate that had gnawed away inside him like a cancerous growth.

A thousand times Pete Mayberry had relived that night fifteen years ago when Lon Hanna, his best friend, had bushwhacked him. Bitterly he recalled the day when he and Lon Hanna had rolled into the San Felipe country. They had both been young then, exuberant with plans and dreams. Here was a wild, untamed land, rich with promise—timber and plowland, pasture and wild longhorns.

Texas had belonged to Mexico then, and the Mexican government, anxious for colonization, had been making fabulous land grants. Each colonist had been entitled to as much as ninety square miles of land. Stephen Austin, stern, just colonist leader, had parceled out the land fairly. His word had been law.

Pete Mayberry and Lon Hanna had selected their site along the Colorado River, not far from the log cabin settlement of San Felipe. They had built a cabin and corrals, caught wild mustangs and cattle. Things had gone smoothly until they had taken in a third partner, a young gent by the name of "Faro" Kearney. Kearney had seemed good natured enough, but he

shirked much of the ranch work. He had begun drinking heavily, spending much of his time in San Felipe, gambling.

By the time Mary Ware's folks had taken up land closeby, Mayberry and Hanna had already been considering dividing up their ranch three ways. Mayberry had thought Mary Ware was the finest girl he had ever met. When she told him one night that she and Lon Hanna were going to be married, Mayberry had tried to hide his awful hurt.

But Mayberry and Lon Hanna had never been the same after that. They had tried to remain close, even after their ranch was divided, but the tension was there. When young Lonny was born, Mayberry had told Lon and Mary he was happy for them. When the drouth hit and times got hard, Mayberry had helped Hanna all he could.

It had galled Mayberry to see Mary deprived of the good things in life. He had known there were times when the Hannas hadn't had enough to eat. Faro Kearney had given up his land, and had gone to live in town, where he had spent his time gambling and apparently was prospering. Mayberry had figured that maybe Kearney could help Hanna. He had taken Hanna with him when he had braced Kearney about a loan.

Kearney had smiled sympathetically and said he was sorry, that he didn't have any money to loan. He had been a little drunk. And Mayberry had known he was lying.

"But I know where yuh can get some money—all yuh want," Kearney had added queerly, "if yuh got the nerve to get it. I can even use some of it myself."

"Where, Kearney?" Mayberry had asked.

Kearney told them then. He had spoken about it as casually as a man buying a drink. He had grinned crookedly, and his black eyes had disclosed his inherent dishonesty. He told them the weekly incoming stage was usually loaded with money. There would be no risk.

Both Mayberry and Hanna had been a little stunned.

"I'm not low enough yet to rob a stage, Kearney," Mayberry had said, his face hard. "Yuh can take that kind of a deal and go to blazes!"

"Same goes for me, Kearney," Hanna had said shortly.

Kearney shrugged. "Just an idea," he had said.

Mary Hanna almost died of pneumonia that winter. Lon Hanna, too proud to beg other poverty-ridden colonists for help, almost starved his family to death. His and Mayberry's credit at the General Store in town was cut off. The night young Lonny cried for food, it was more than either of them could stand.

They went to Faro Kearney in desperation. They shut their minds to the crooked thing they were doing. A week later they robbed the incoming stage. It wasn't hard. With guns in their fists they made a rich haul, splitting it three ways and separating.

MAYBERRY headed for his own cabin with his share of the loot. It was the first wrong thing he had ever done in his life, and his conscience nagged him. He tried to justify it by telling himself he had done it for Lon Hanna and Mary.

But he hadn't slept well that night. Next morning when he had gone out to the horse shed and looked beneath the hay, the money was gone!

There in the mud Mayberry had seen the tracks of the man who had robbed him. He found a spur rowel close by—one that had belonged to Lon Hanna! Shaken and fighting mad, Mayberry followed the thief's tracks. They led straight toward Hanna's ranch.

Mayberry had been almost to the river—hot on Hanna's trail—when the shot had come from the brush. Mayberry's head had seemed to explode. Searing, blinding pain shot through him as he spilled from the back of his horse. But in that last second of consciousness he had cursed Lon Hanna. He had known that Hanna had tricked him, robbed him.

He had still been unconscious when the Mexican authorities found him. A quick, merciless military tribunal had proved that he was one of the three men who had robbed the stage. They resorted to torture to make him confess who the other two men were. But Mayberry refused. He raved and cursed like a crazy man.

"Tell yuh? No, I won't! Do anything yuh like, but yuh can't make me talk! The snake that framed me belongs to me—not to the law! I want to make him

suffer! And I won't expose the third man because he'd tell everything. Now give me yore sentence, and be blasted!"

Mayberry talking like that had not helped matters. They had sentenced him to the dungeon prison in Mier, south of the Rio Grande. The Mexican authorities had shrugged when they said, "Twenty years." They had known that no man could live that long in the dreadful filth and disease of Mier prison.

But they had not known Pete Mayberry. They had not known what such terrible hate could do to a man. That first night in prison, clutching the bars, he had said:

"I'll come back, Lon Hanna. I'll come back and make yuh suffer torments. . . ."

A stoop-shouldered man with haunted eyes and long, shaggy gray hair shuffled into Captain Jack Hays' Ranger headquarters in San Antonio. His jeans and jacket were torn, soiled. His boots were mud-caked, worn.

"I'm Pete Mayberry," he said in his queer, fumbling way. "I met Hank Justine and Big Foot Wallace in Mier. They told me to look yuh up—that I might stay with yuh till I kind of got on my feet."

Small-statured, cold-blue-eyed Captain Jack Hays knew men. He stared at the human scarecrow before him and said quietly:

"What were you doing there, Mayberry?"

"I was in prison."

"And the Texas boys released you?"

Mayberry nodded listlessly. At times his memory seemed to come and go. He shifted from one foot to the other, trying to hide the agony of his hunger, his trembling weakness.

"I seem to recall your case, Mayberry," Hays said. "You were sent up for stagecoach robbery several years ago."

"Fifteen," said Mayberry.

"Things have changed since then. So far as I'm concerned your case is closed. We've got room here for you, if you want to stay. You can bunk with the men and eat in the cook shack at the rear. We'll find some odd jobs for you to do."

Mayberry began by helping the Mexican cook. When the Mexican was killed in a *cantina* brawl one night, Mayberry took over the job. It kept his mind occupied. It meant he enjoyed the luxury of a clean bunk and good food. However, his strength was slow in returning. And ever inside him was the restless, fierce urge to do the task he had set his mind to.

Mayberry kept his secret locked inside him. The tough, hard-bitten Rangers were kind to him, but Mayberry lived in another world. Seared into his brain was the image of the man who had double-crossed him.

At times he would stare at himself in the mirror. In no way did he resemble the strapping young gent he once had been. He was only thirty-eight, but he looked to be sixty.

"Hanna'll never recognize me," he said aloud one day.

"What'd yuh say, pardner?" a Ranger asked, grinning.

"Nothin'," Mayberry mumbled.

"How'd yuh like to join the force, pardner, and be a Ranger?"

Mayberry stared for a long moment. "Why, I'd like that."

IT WAS the first spark of interest he had shown in anything since he had been at Ranger headquarters. Of course, it was more of a joke than anything else among the boys at first. But when they saw how Mayberry was taking it they went ahead.

In all seriousness, Captain Jack Hays swore Mayberry in as a full-fledged Ranger. When the ceremony was over they shook Mayberry's hand.

"Just keep this in mind, Mayberry," Hays said soberly. "Whatever you do—never disgrace that badge. It's yours to keep, to honor and respect!"

Mayberry's shoulders straightened a little. A queer spark of pride shone in his faded eyes. He saluted awkwardly, and the other men didn't grin.

"Yes, sir," he mumbled. "I'll remember."

At the end of another month Mayberry could no longer stand the torture of waiting. With the money that had been paid him, some new clothes, his horse and pistol, he rode out of San Antonio one night, leaving behind a note that said:

Cap Jack Hays
Sir:
You and the boys was good to me, but I got to keep going. There's a job I got to do. When it's done, if I live, I may come back. I'll never forget

what you done told me about the badge.
Pete Mayberry

Mayberry rode on northeast, avoiding the deep-rutted wagon roads. Pinned to the inside of his shirt was a Ranger badge. At his hip was the five-shot Navy pistol.

He shot wild game for food. He passed scattered log cabin settlements where grain was growing in the stump-dotted fields. The country had changed in fifteen years. Even the people seemed different.

It was a warm fall night when Mayberry rode into San Felipe. He stared in amazement at the scatteration of cabins and 'dobe buildings. Buckboards, high-wheeled freighters and canvas-topped Conestogas rattled and rumbled along the dusty main street. Saloons, gambling joints and stores echoed to the lusty undertone of capacity patronage. Here was a Frontier town, booming, lawless and wild.

At a hitchrack Mayberry left his horse. He joined the throng along the plank walk, wending his way past the lamplit windows. Coming toward him he glimpsed a lawman's badge. The wearer was a turkey-necked man with nervous, close-set eyes.

Mayberry stepped up to the man. "I'm a stranger here," he mumbled. "Lookin' for—"

"Out of the way, feller!" the lawman gobbled. "I'm a busy man!"

Mayberry stared as the man went on. Then he shuffled on down the street, his brain afire with ugly memories. When he came to the gaudy red front saloon with Faro Kearney's name on it, he went inside.

The smoke-filled room was crowded with brush-poppers, buckskin men and flashily dressed sports. The bar was lined. Along one wall were the gaming tables. At the rear of the huge room several booted, gun-heeled men were dancing with short-skirted percentage girls to the blare of a Mexican orchestra.

From a perspiring barkeep Mayberry learned that Kearney was in his office, just off the front of the bar.

"He ain't to be bothered either!" the barman barked.

Mayberry turned to the side door marked "Private." He shoved it open and slammed it behind him. It was a small room, ornately furnished. Pictures of dancing girls were on the walls. Behind a desk a bloated-faced, paunchy man whirled, his snarling remarks chopped short. Across from him a girl in a beaded short skirt turned, glaring.

The man came up out of his chair.

"Get out!"

"Howdy, Faro," Mayberry said.

Something like a red-hot knife blade seared across Mayberry's treacherous memory. For an instant his mind was clear. He watched the amazement on Kearney's face turn to rage as the big tinhorn stood spraddle-legged and demanding.

"Get out!" he snarled. "Or I'll throw yuh out!"

"I'm Pete Mayberry, Faro. I want to talk to yuh."

Faro Kearney started like a man stabbed in the back. His flabby-jowled face drained ashen. His beady eyes thinned. Then he had a grip on himself. Out of the corner of his mouth he told the girl to leave. When she had gone, he extended a limp hand.

"Heck, Pete, yuh've changed," he managed. "I didn't know yuh. Even yore voice has changed. Tell me about yoreself."

"Fifteen years in Hades does things to a man, Faro."

MAYBERRY ignored the extended hand. But Kearney didn't seem to notice. Slowly, very slowly, he sank back into his chair.

The years had put beef on Kearney. His hair was thin, but his black beady eyes were still cunning and shrewd. Patently he had prospered, for his clothes were immaculate. And Mayberry had heard that he was a power in San Felipe, a dangerous man when crossed, reveling in the lush profits of his sin-pocked career.

Now he forced a smile.

"Sit down, Pete," he said, and repeated, "tell me about yoreself."

Mayberry didn't move. His sunken eyes were those of a dead man.

"Where's Lon Hanna, Faro?"

"Got a spread back in the hills—west of town."

"He's why I come back, Faro."

"What do yuh mean?"

Mayberry laughed a little crazily. "I come back to kill him, Faro. Seein' him go down with a bullet through his middle is all that matters to me. It's none of yore affair. And yuh don't have to worry about me sayin' anything about yore share in that deal fifteen years ago. It's not because I like yuh, Faro. I didn't like yore sneakin' eyes then and I don't now. I thought yuh might like to know, that's all."

Kearney's face was a frozen mask.

"Nothin' yuh could do or say could booger me, Pete," he said coldly. "I cut a wide swath in San Felipe—with guns to back me. I care not one hoot whether yuh kill Lon Hanna, or he kills you! I've gone my way and Lon Hanna's gone his. I haven't seen him in years. That son of his—"

"The little boy?"

Kearney must have realized then that Mayberry's mind was not what it should be.

"Young Lonny's not a boy any more, Pete. He's a man past votin' age. I understand he's runnin' the ranch now."

"And Mary?"

"Never got over her turnin' yuh down for Hanna, did yuh, Pete?"

Mayberry frowned. His mind seemed jumbled again.

"No, I don't reckon I ever did, Faro. Funny."

"Well, come back to see me any time, Pete."

"Shore," said Mayberry, and walked out.

Outside the saloon, he trudged along the crowded walk to his horse. Mounting, he rode out of town, heading west. He kept remembering the way Kearney had stared at him. There had been fear in the big tinhorn's eyes, he was sure. A full confession from Pete Mayberry might still send Faro Kearney to prison.

Mayberry cursed himself then for looking up Kearney. Some sixth sense warned him of danger. In the darkness he reined up, keening the air like a coyote. A rising whisper of hoofbeats along his backtrail sent him spurring into the high brush.

With pistol drawn, Mayberry waited, eyes probing the darkness. He watched the shadowy figures of two riders come closer. As they jogged past one of them was talking as he handed a bottle to his companion.

"—an' Kearney said he was a little loco. Keep yore eyes peeled, Jed."

Mayberry waited until the two men had gone. He knew then that Kearney meant to kill him. Staying in the high mesquite, Mayberry rode on slowly to the westward. It was a wild, hilly country of scrubby trees and dense brush. He dipped into a draw. In a thicket, near a water-hole, he came up to the log shack, and stopped.

Dismal candlelight seeped through a single blanket-covered window. Near the front door a shadow stirred. Then Mayberry froze as a voice leaped out of the gloom at him.

"Don't move, senor! I'll keel you."

Again a finger seemed to probe Mayberry's memory. That was a familiar voice.

"*Que hola,* Chico," he said in Spanish. "You do not seem to remember your friends."

A toothless old Mexican crept out of the shadows, a rifle clutched in his bony hands. He peered up cautiously at Mayberry.

"I do not know you, *viejo,*" he whimpered.

"I am Pete Mayberry, Chico. Remember, you worked for Lon Hanna and me when we first came to this country. You helped us build our cabin."

"But you are not the same, *viejo,*" the old Mexican protested. "You are old. Senor Mayberry was young. And then he disappeared. Do not fool me, old man."

"Since then I have been in the prison at Mier, Chico."

"Come inside, *viejo,*" Chico said, after a pause. "There in the light I can tell, perhaps."

Mayberry dismounted, went inside the crude hut. There Chico studied him, his face slowly lighting with joy.

"You are Pete Mayberry!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Chico."

THEY talked after that, always in Spanish, like men do who know the meaning of loneliness and tragedy. Mayberry made no effort to explain why he was here. Nor did Chico ask. Instead, the ancient Mexican goatherder spoke

guardedly of the lawlessness. He told of bushwhackings and gunfights. Of gunmen who killed cattle, skinned them and sold the hides at a huge profit.

Beef, Chico explained, was practically worthless. The markets were gone. Lon Hanna, like the other ranchers, was trying desperately to salvage what cattle he could. But all were being robbed blind. Land prices had skyrocketed. Speculators were getting rich. But the ranchers were suffering.

Mayberry listened, then he said in English:

"Who's doin' all this cow killin' an' hide stealin', Chico?"

Fear began eating into Chico's red-rimmed eyes. "That I had best not say, senor."

"It don't matter, I guess."

Chico crept to the door, peered out. Then he fairly hissed:

"Faro Kearney, senor!"

Mayberry grinned. "I figgered that. So Kearney's not only gettin' rich from his saloon in town, he's got men stealin' Lon Hanna's cowhides. What about the law, Chico?"

"The sheriff in town is a braying jackass, senor."

Mayberry laughed hollowly. "I think that's fine, Chico—Kearney stealin' from Hanna. That's fine."

Chico stared at him, perceiving the bitterness and hate that had warped Mayberry's mind, that had twisted his soul. For Mayberry's faith in all mankind was gone, and when that was gone Chico, strangely enough, knew there was no hope.

"You have changed, senor," he said quietly.

They had little to say after that. When Mayberry went out to his horse he asked the directions to Hanna's ranch. Another mile to the west, Chico told him.

Mayberry rode away, haunted by memories that burned into his brain. Occasionally wild longhorn cattle smashed through the brush about him. Topping a hogback, he spotted the twinkling lights of a ranchhouse in a basin below. As he drew nearer he saw the dim outline of the pole corrals and outbuildings.

Even in the darkness Mayberry saw all the telltale signs of poverty. The barn roof sagged, gates were down.

In the shadows next to a shed he stopped, slid to the ground. Across an open yard stood the main house, its windows yellow with lamplight. Back of it was a windmill and a shed.

Mayberry felt cold sweat crawl down his face. There was a mad pounding in his brain. Clutching his pistol, he started forward through the darkness. His lips were parted and he was trembling. For fifteen years he had suffered and prayed for this moment.

A cricket stopped chirping. Mayberry turned, his heart pounding wildly against his ribs. He thought he saw a shadow move behind him. He wasn't sure. He figured his imagination was running away with him.

Step after step he went on. His boots made tiny crunching sounds in the sand.

He passed near one of the curtained windows, peered inside, and the awful hate within him was agony. He saw Mary first, and she was gray. But Mayberry didn't see the kindliness of her face and her gray hair. He saw the girl who years ago had said:

"I like you, Pete. You're like a brother to me. And I always want it to be like that, even after Lon and I are married."

She was inside now. She was sitting in a rocker, knitting, talking to little Lonny. Only Lonny wasn't a kid with big blue eyes and curly hair. He was grown up, tall and wide-shouldered—a clean-cut youth with an easy smile.

"Bedtime, Mother," he was saying.

And the world flashed back fifteen years for Pete Mayberry. He saw a tall man, gaunt and gray as a ghost, rise from another chair. A man upon whom the years lay heavily. He said something to Mary Ware, but his words were lost to Mayberry.

Mayberry's throat was dry, constricted. He all but cried out against the throbbing in his brain. His eyes were wet with strange emotions.

Through his mental chaos a queer inner voice screamed:

"He made you suffer, Pete! Lon Hanna. He tried to kill you after you had befriended him! Now kill him!"

Strange things Mayberry remembered later—the sound of his boots on the steps, his hand on the door knob. Then the lamplight was in his face. Three people

like statues, stood facing him, their eyes wide, staring, transfixed!

JUST inside the portal Mayberry stood, eyes burning in his bearded face. His voice was a ghostly whisper of hate:

"I've come back from perdition to kill yuh, Lon!"

Then Mary's terrified scream as Mayberry's pistol lifted, and a movement on the steps behind Mayberry. But all he saw was the frozen horror on Lon Hanna's face. Blind to all danger, young Lonny lunged toward Mayberry as the pistol exploded.

Then the whole world seemed to crash down upon Mayberry. His brain exploded in a sheet of red fire. He reeled, turned, the pistol falling from his fingers.

Only then did he see Chico, club in hand, standing in the doorway. Across the room, clutching his stomach, his face white with horror and pain, young Lonny was stumbling back into his mother's arms. Then Mayberry's knees sagged and he fell. . . .

Somehow he clung to a tiny spark of consciousness. But he was blind and deathly sick. Voices rose and fell like an ocean's surf. In his helplessness he vaguely wondered what was happening. Bitterly he cursed the fate that had made him fail in his one mission in life.

"Finish me, Hanna," he tried to say. "Yuh might as well. It's either you or me!"

Throughout an endless phantasmagoria, Mayberry had no recollection of being carried into one of the bedrooms. Once, when his mind cleared, he realized that he was in bed. A curt-voiced oldster with mutton-chop sideburns, and smelling of ether, was bending over him, applying a bandage about his head.

"This cuts across the grain, Mayberry," he muttered. "Giving aid to a person like you."

Mayberry thought that over when the man left the room. A lamp was burning on the dresser. Toward dawn Mayberry looked up to see Mary standing over him. The lamplight made a halo about her gray hair. There was something pitiful in her silent, white-faced stare. Harassed by uncertainty and despair, worn with grief, she was bearing up under the burden as only a courageous Frontier woman could.

"Lon is dead?" Mayberry asked. "I killed him?"

Mary's lips trembled. "No, Pete. You shot Lonny."

"I meant to kill Lon, Mary. Fifteen years ago he, Faro Kearney and I robbed a stage-coach—"

"I know all about it, Pete."

"He robbed me of my share of the loot, Mary," Mayberry cried out accusingly. "I'd hid the money in the shed. That mornin' I found the money gone. But Lon's spur rowel was there, where he'd lost it. I trailed him toward home. He bushwhacked me near the river."

Mary's eyes filled with tears as she dropped to her knees.

"Wait, Pete. Listen to me. I see it all now. Faro Kearney came by our cabin that morning. I knew something was wrong. Later Lon missed one of his spurs. And you had already been tried and sent to prison before we heard about it. Lon confessed to me what he had done then, Pete. His conscience was killing him. I prayed that young Lonny would never find out."

"Lon doublecrossed me, Mary."

"No, Pete. He never left the cabin that morning. I knew you'd had a hand in the robbery, thinking it would help us. But stolen money never helped anyone, Pete. Lon returned his share of the money to the stage company without anyone knowing it. We lost our ranch, moved up here. Believe me, Pete."

Mary Hanna's last words were like a prayer. She remained kneeling, wracked with sobs, her strength spent. When she left the room Mayberry remained staring at the ceiling. It seemed as if something were being torn loose inside him.

He knew that Mary had told him the truth. A woman like Mary didn't lie. He knew that in his blind hate he had hurt as fine a woman as had ever been born, and shot an innocent boy. And Lon Hanna—

The shadows seemed to lift from Mayberry's mind. He knew now that Faro Kearney was the one who had framed him, not Lon Hanna. And that knowledge shook him to the depths of his soul. His throat drew tight. He wanted to cry out against the ghastly mistake he had made, but no sound escaped him.

He shut his eyes, fighting against the

mental torture. A haunting voice came through the maelstrom, the gentle voice of Captain Jack Hays:

"Whatever you do, never disgrace that badge. It's yours to keep, to honor and respect."

SUNLIGHT was peeping through the window when Chico entered the room. He blew out the lamp. He moved up to the bedside.

"I am sorry, senor," he said sadly. "There was no other way. I followed you last night. I knew something was wrong."

"It is all right, Chico," said Mayberry.

From out in the yard came the swelling clatter of hoofbeats, the muffled voices of men. Chico went to the window. When he returned to the bedside he told Mayberry what was happening. A neighboring rancher had been raided the night before. His stock had been stolen, his wife and two children killed.

"Who did it, Chico?"

"Kearney's gunmen, senor," the Mexican whispered.

He explained that the cowmen were meeting here. They were taking the law into their own hands. They had sent for the Rangers, but they weren't waiting now.

"I'm a Ranger," said Mayberry.

Chico shook his head sadly and left the room.

Mayberry closed his eyes.

"Give me the strength to die like a man!" he whispered.

With a lot of effort, Mayberry pulled himself out of bed. He reeled slightly as he went to the chair where his clothes lay in a neat bundle. His Ranger badge was still pinned to the inside of his jacket. The old Navy pistol and cartridge belt were on the floor near his boots.

Mayberry dressed quickly. He went to the open window and crawled out. His knees almost buckled as he dropped to the ground. At the corner of the cabin he saw the saddled horses and buckboards in the yard. Most of the cowmen were on the portico, out of view.

No one saw the stumbling figure hurry to the shed. It took him only a few minutes to saddle his horse. Then mounting, he loped off into the high mesquite, clutching the kak horn for support. From the bedroom window the little Mexican spotted the fleeing figure. His cry brought the cowmen running. . . .

Mayberry again avoided the road into San Felipe. He stayed in the high brush until he reached the edge of town. Then he turned into the main street, riding slowly, his bloody bandaged head erect, his feverish eyes looking straight ahead.

Only a few people were along the walks. A brooding tension, fraught with danger, gripped the place. Death was in the air. Mayberry felt it, but a queer smile tugged at his lips. In death he knew he would find peace. And in killing Faro Kearney a debt would be paid, a troubled range also would know peace.

The sun-baked false-fronts tossed back the echoes of his horse's hoofs. As he passed the sheriff's office the stringy-necked lawman bawled irately:

"Hey there, you!"

If Mayberry heard he gave no sign. In the doorway of Kearney's saloon he saw the big gambler, gun-heeled himself and flanked by two hard-faced renegades. Kearney, eyes hooded with brooding shadows, watched as Mayberry reined up close by. All the odds were with the tinhorn. Inside the saloon were more of his hired killers, primed for anything.

"Best get out of town, Mayberry," Kearney sneered. "Yuh might get hurt."

The town was like a powder keg, deadly still. But Mayberry's voice was for Kearney alone.

"I just found out the truth, Kearney. *You* framed me, not Lon Hanna!"

Kearney laughed, but his eyes were not good to see. All pretense dropped from him like a mask. The truth was on him for Mayberry to see.

"Shore I did, yuh old fool!" he snarled. "But what yuh goin' to do about it?"

"This!" croaked Mayberry.

And he drew! Drew in the face of such ludicrous odds that Kearney's gunmen missed their chance. Mayberry's big pistol was roaring as Kearney's own six-shooter cleared leather. Horror blended with pain in the gambler's beady eyes. In that instant of gun-blare din he lurched forward, dead on his feet, then sprawled in the dust.

Mayberry's horse bucked, squealed, then went down. And in that dust cloud of threshing hoofs and bullet hail, Mayberry miraculously lived. Rolling, shoot-

ing, he flattened behind the dying animal as bedlam broke loose.

DOWN the street, straight toward him, roared a cavalcade of horsemen. Like a cyclone they hit the center of town, their vengeance guns driving lead into Kearney's saloon.

Through a red fog Mayberry saw them. At their head was Lon Hanna, six-guns blazing, bent on forever smashing the tyrannical yoke of Kearney's outlawry. With him were the other cowmen, honest men, fighting fire with fire—and some of them dying.

In that death melee, Mayberry's joyous shout was never heard. He hurled to his feet as Lon Hanna and his warriors swung down. Side by side, Mayberry and Hanna went through the saloon doors first. Only then, in that blazing inferno, did lead drive Mayberry to the floor. He tried to rise again as men leaped over him, but his strength was gone.

He never knew when the firing entirely ceased. Daubing at his shoulder wound, he crawled against one wall. And there Lon Hanna found him. Other men crowded around as Hanna knelt at Mayberry's side.

It was strange the way the two men acted.

Only a man big of body and soul could have done what Lon Hanna did. And Pete Mayberry knew it.

"Just before we left home the Doc said Lonny was goin' to live, Pete," Hanna said softly. "With a little patchin' yuh'll soon be back on yore feet. Mary and I both would like for yuh to come back to the ranch and live with us."

Mayberry was too choked up to say much. All he could manage was:

"I'd like it too, Lon. . . ."

Pete Mayberry was elected the new sheriff that coming spring. Folks didn't mind because he wasn't as husky and spry as a lawman might be. Nor did they mind him spending a lot of his time on Lon Hanna's ranchhouse porch, visiting with Hanna and Mary.

When young Lonny left home to join the Rangers, Pete Mayberry handed him his old badge, his prize possession.

"Yuh're a good boy, Lonny," he said proudly. "But just keep this in mind: whatever yuh do—never disgrace that badge. It's yores to keep, to honor and respect."

Young Lonny Hanna grinned. "Thanks, Uncle Pete."

"Thank Captain Jack Hays, Lonny," Mayberry said softly. "He said it first, and I never forgot. Outside of yore father, he was one of the greatest gents I ever knew."

"I'm Arrestin' Yuh, Bannock Jake—and If Yore Pals Try to Stop Me, They're Dead Men!"

IT TOOK cold nerve for Bob Pryor to talk that way when he and his pards were vastly outnumbered. On his side—Editor Reynolds, Celestino, Al Sieber, and Lew Mills. On his foeman's side—a score of gunnies who were ready to fight to the death to further their chieftain's evil dream of empire. But—so forceful were the Rio Kid's words, so menacing the muzzle of his gun, backed by the firm purpose in his eyes, that the henchmen of Bannock Jake edged away, cowed and fearful.

The Rio Kid grinned. He had won—but he knew it was only a temporary victory over the sinister marauders who wage a terrible fight against the progress of the range in IDAHO RAIDERS, the smash-packed complete Rio Kid novel by Tom Curry featured in the February issue of our companion magazine THE RIO KID WESTERN—now on sale at all stands!

You'll meet great pioneers of the West in IDAHO RAIDERS—and you'll thrill to their deeds of daring. You'll also find Bob Pryor and Celestino at their fighting best—facing some of the most formidable foes in their careers. IDAHO RAIDERS is a humdinger of a yarn packed with action, excitement and stirring adventure!

THE CARDS RUN RED

By BEN FRANK

The brand of poker that "Watches" John Vidlak plays when he visits the boomtown of Dennison proves plumb surprising to a passel of crooks, schemers and assorted slippery hombres!

CHAPTER I

Wanderer's Return

TWO things had brought "Watches" John Vidlak back to the rail-end boomtown of Dennison. He had a hankering to thank old Doc McKay again for saving his life when he'd had pneumonia, and he had heard that in Dennison he would find a poker player who was his match.

Vidlak slid from the hand-tooled saddle and turned his fine, high-strung roan over to the bow-legged oldster at the livery stable. Then he spanked the trail dust out of his pant legs with supple brown hands.

He was a tall man with young eyes set wide in a brown face which had fine-textured skin and well-formed bones. His shoulders were wide, his hips slim. Humor wrinkles radiated from the corners of his blue eyes which missed little.

He shoved his pearl-gray Stetson back from graying black hair and gave the oldster a quick, one-sided smile.

"I pay well for good service," he said with a slight Texas drawl, and dropped a twenty-dollar gold piece into the old man's shirt pocket.

The oldster grinned toothlessly. "Welcome to Dennison, Mr. Vidlak."

"Thanks, Dave," John Vidlak said.

A Complete Novelet

As Lyman screamed with fear, Doc McKay rasped, "Shut up!" and centered the gun on the big man's chest

He unbuttoned his long black coat, and the sunlight glittered on six solid-gold watch chains across his black velvet vest. This vest always made people who saw it for the first time stare. There was no other vest in the world like it. Six silk-lined pockets, three on either side of a row of pearl buttons, and the heavy gold chains ran from the pearl buttons to the pockets.

"Why in time," people asked, "would a man carry six watches?"

Only a few knew the answer.

But every gambler between Frisco and St. Louis had heard about the vest and the man who wore it. Honest gamblers were proud to know Vidlak. Tinhorns kept their lips buttoned whenever his name was mentioned, and their shifty eyes would cloud when they heard he was within a hundred miles of their crooked games.

VIDLAK fumbled with the upper left-hand chain and lifted out a large, beautifully engraved watch. His thumb pressed the stem, and the lid flew open, letting the sun flash on the mirroring crystal.

"Looks like I'm a mite late for dinner, Dave," he drawled. "Guess I'll mosey over to the hotel to clean up and eat. Reckon it'll take me an hour. By then, folks ought to know I'm in town."

The oldster grinned. "Reckon they will," he agreed.

"Yuh wouldn't know a gent by the name of Ace Strelo, would you, Dave?" Vidlak asked.

"There's a feller by that name that hangs out at Lyman's place. Poker player."

Vidlak looked blank. "Lyman's place?"

"The Emporium. Guess Lyman come here after you left—four, five years ago." The old man glanced worriedly over his shoulder. "Mr. Vidlak," he whispered cautiously, "keep yore eyes open when yuh're around Lyman!"

"Why?" Vidlak asked.

But old Dave turned away, and made no answer.

Vidlak strolled away toward the hotel. When he came to the old Dennison Opera House, he stopped to study a large, hand-printed poster that was tacked to the door. It read:

CONCERT AT EIGHT TONIGHT
JOSEPH WIDMAN, VIOLINIST
ALL PROCEEDS FOR
THE DENNISON HOSPITAL FUND

"Widman," Vidlak muttered. "That name sounds kind of familiar. Now, where've I met up with a Widman?"

Footsteps clacked on the board walk, and he turned away from the building. A stooped, ferret-faced little man came to a dead stop in front of him. The man carried twin sixes low against his thighs, and John Vidlak knew that this man could use those guns. He had met this little killer before.

"Watches!" the small man muttered.

John Vidlak's mouth twisted, and his right hand moved close to his lowest right-hand watch chain.

"Trigger Pool," he said softly. "Long time no see. What coyote yuh slingin' lead for now?"

"Trigger" Pool's thin lips tightened across his yellowish teeth, but he made no answer. He moved around Vidlak, never once taking his glittering eyes off the black velvet vest. Once past the gambler, the little gunman went limping down the walk. That limping gait brought a thin smile to Vidlak's lean face.

The gambler saw the little man turn into a big false-fronted building on the far side of the street. A sign on it said:

LYMAN'S EMPORIUM

"Can it be Pool's just thirsty?" Vidlak thought, remembering that "Ace" Strelo worked in Lyman's place. "Or does the little lobo have business in there?"

Why, he wondered, had old Dave been afraid to talk about Con Lyman?

He shrugged, and then went on to the hotel.

Old "Pop" Kline, proprietor, blinked up at him from behind a dusty counter. The light was bad and he didn't recognize Vidlak.

"Got a empty room on the first floor," he wheezed, "but yuh're late for dinner."

Smiling, Vidlak opened his long black coat over the gleaming watch chains, and the old man's eyes widened.

"Watches John Vidlak!" he snorted. "Why didn't yuh say so?" He turned, and bellowed: "Ma! Fix up a slab of steak.

And some fried spuds. And mince pie."

Vidlak spun a twenty-dollar gold piece on the counter. The old man grinned.

"Want to go to yore room and wash up while that steak's cookin'?" he asked.

"Reckon I got enough trail dirt on me to grow a fair crop of bull nettles," Vidlak said. He grinned also. "Hear yuh got a new citizen in town. A Con Lyman."

Old Pop's lips snapped shut and stayed that way as he led Vidlak to his room.

Alone in his room, Vidlak thought about Trigger Pool, and of when he had met the little gunman in a gambling house in Arcadia. And he wondered if Trigger remembered that, too, and likely didn't like what he remembered.

AT THAT moment Trigger Pool had just limped up to the Emporium bar, his breath rattling a little in his scrawny throat. A glance about the long, smoky room told him that his boss, Con Lyman, was not there, but he saw Ace Strelo, Lyman's right-hand man, playing poker with a whisky drummer and a fat-faced cowboy.

Trigger Pool felt as much affection for Ace Strelo as a man of his caliber was capable of feeling. Strelo wasn't stingy and grasping like Con Lyman. Pool could usually borrow a few dollars from Ace who wasn't fussy about getting his money back.

Trigger tossed down his drink and was pouring a second slug when a hand touched him on the shoulder. He whirled, his crooked fingers wrapping around the slick black handles of his Colts. Ace Strelo's pasty grinning face hung over him.

"Don't never come up behind me like that!" Trigger rasped.

Strelo kept on grinning and began to build a cigarette.

"Yuh look like yuh've just seen a ghost," he observed.

"I have," trigger said shortly. "Watches John Vidlak's in town!"

"The devil yuh say!" Strelo exclaimed. "There's a man I've always wanted to meet."

"You'll meet him," Trigger said drily. "I don't know of any other gambler in town that Watches would give a hoot to play poker with except you. And he don't go places unless he's got a game in sight."

Strelo's smoky eyes narrowed. "Trigger, how much money do yuh owe me?"

The little gunslinger stiffened. "I don't know. Why?"

"I'll need all I can lay my hands on," the gambler said softly. "I understand Vidlak don't play for peanuts. And I want to have enough cash to interest him."

"If yuh're smart, yuh'll stay away from Watches," Trigger said harshly. "I seen him once in a game in Arcadia three, four years ago, when I was deputy sheriff under Ad Palmer. Palmer was in control of the gamblin' there. Three of Palmer's men died in that game, and I've been walkin' with a limp ever since."

"Tell me about it," Strelo said, through a cloud of smoke.

Trigger hitched up his gun-belts.

"Ain't much to tell. There was a lot of money on the table—mebbe twenty, twenty-five thousand. Palmer's men was usin' their own money mostly, and Charley Brant started markin' the cards with his thumb nail. Somebody crossed Charley's marks up, and Jeff Platt won the pot. It was ten thousand. Charley figgered Jeff crossed him and went for his gun. Red Anderson tried to stop 'em. Watches just set there grinnin' like a cat full of cream.

"All perdition broke loose in that room, and when it was over Jeff and Charley was dead, Red was dyin', and I was down with a slug in my leg."

"Go on," Ace Strelo chuckled.

"It ain't funny!" Trigger blazed. "Two dead men, one a-dyin', and me sicker'n a poisoned pup! And that cussed Watches against the wall, fingerin' one of them gold watch chains and grinnin' at me. He hadn't got a scratch! About that time, I passed out."

"When crooks fall out—" Strelo began.

"Wait—I ain't quite finished." Trigger cut in. "I come to with Palmer pourin' water over my face. Watches was gone, and so was the ten thousand he'd put into the game. He hadn't touched the rest of the money. That night the sawbones took the slug outa my leg. It was a little feller—and Palmer's men all packed forty-fives!"

Strelo's pasty face lost its grin. "You mean—"

"I mean Watches must've plugged me with a hide-away gun. And I reckon it was him who crossed up Charley's mark-

in's, and saw to it that Jeff won that pot. Look, Ace, you don't want any game with Watches John Vidlak!"

"That's where yuh're wrong," the gambler said. "As long as a man plays an honest game of poker with Vidlak, the best man wins. I play an honest game—in spite of Con Lyman. I might just happen to be better than Vidlak."

Pool snorted in disgust.

"Lyman wants to see yuh in his office," Strelo said, as he started back toward his table.

THAT was another thing that Trigger Pool liked about Strelo. He called the big boss Lyman, and never licked the big man's boots.

Trigger set down his empty glass, limped to the back of the room, climbed the narrow stairs and pushed into Con Lyman's office.

Con Lyman, owner of the Emporium and boss of the rail-end boomtown's unlawful element, was a big man with a square flabby face, black eyebrows that met over a fat nose, and a bald spot which he tried to hide under thinning hair.

When Trigger Pool shoved into his office, he lifted his eyes to the little man's ferret face.

It was these steel-blue eyes that people first noticed when they met Con Lyman. Under their coating of thin ice lay a gleam of insatiable greed. In the five years that he had been in Dennison, he had turned a modest amount of dishonest money into a sizable fortune. And his greed for power had grown with his wealth.

"Sit down, Trigger," he said harshly.

Trigger lowered himself on the edge of a chair. He didn't meet the steel-blue eyes.

Lyman leaned back in his groaning swivel chair, and smiled.

"Young Kelley will be in the ticket booth tonight at intermission time," he said. "That's when yuh're to get the money."

Trigger shrugged his thin shoulders.

"Wouldn't it be better if I went right after intermission? There wouldn't be so many people around."

"That's just the point," Lyman clipped. "A man don't show up as much in a crowd as when he is by himself. Kelley'll be expectin' yuh. Hit him hard enough to make a bruise, and he'll make out he was knocked cold and didn't see who done it. Ace and I'll be at the other end of the lobby. Walk up to me kind of careless-like and slip me the money. Savvy?"

Trigger nodded.

"Don't hurt Kelley. Just muss him up a little. I've got plans for him. He's easy to handle now that he owes me money, and it may be right convenient for us to have somebody inside old Joyce Kelley's bank."

Trigger grinned, got to his feet and limped to the door. Then he remembered something that wiped off the grin.

"Watches John Vidlak is in town, Boss," he said.

"Vidlak, the gambler?" The greedy light burned brighter in Lyman's eyes. "Yuh think Ace Strelo could handle him in a game?"

"If yuh want to hang on to yore dinero, Boss," Trigger advised, "yuh won't back anybody against Watches!"

As he limped out Lyman's fat fingers were drumming on the desk top, the greed in his eyes plain. He sat there for a long time, staring at the wall. Watches John Vidlak, he had heard, carried a lot of money around with him.

CHAPTER II

Getting a Line on Things

WATCHES JOHN VIDLAK ate his late dinner in the hotel dining room, alone. He enjoyed eating, and took his time.

Ma Kline's mince pie hit him exactly right. He had called for a second slice when a young man of about twenty hurried into the dingy dining room, and came at once to Vidlak's table.

"You're Watches John Vidlak," he said quickly.

Vidlak nodded and studied him. The young fellow wore riding boots, leather chaps and a red checkered shirt, open at his brown throat. He didn't exactly have the stamp of cowboy, yet he was not a dude. He belonged to the West, yet seemed apart from it. His face was lean and sensitive, and his gray eyes met Vidlak's gaze unflinchingly.

Without invitation, he dropped down on

a chair across from the gambler and leaned his arms on the table.

"I heard that you just arrived in town," he said. "People say you'll gamble for high stakes on anything."

"No," Vidlak said. "Not on anything. I play poker."

The young man's gaze shifted to Vidlak's slim brown hands, then to the array of gold watch chains. He seemed at a loss, and worry pulled deep wrinkles into his forehead.

"What's on yore mind, son?" Vidlak asked.

"Mr. Vidlak," his visitor said, "I need ten thousand dollars!"

The gambler smiled thinly and bit the end off a cigar.

"Who don't need ten thousand dollars?" he drawled.

"I've got to have it tomorrow morning," the young man said, his voice desperate. "That's why I've come here. I have a violin that's worth twenty thousand in the East. I'll let you have it for ten. It's a chance for you to double your money."

"Hold on," Vidlak said. "How do I know it's worth twenty thousand in the East?"

"I came to you," the boy said tightly, "because I thought you might be willing to take a chance on that."

"Why don't yuh sell it in the East yoreself?"

"There isn't time."

"Borrow on it from the bank."

The young man's lips curled. "To these people in Dennison it's just another fiddle. They can't believe it's worth a hundredth of what my grandpop paid for it."

As he got to his feet, his shoulders sagged. He looked whipped.

Vidlak liked his looks. He thumbed a match into flame, keeping his eyes fixed steadily on the young fellow's tight face.

"Be honest with me, son," he said goodnaturedly. "Are yuh sure yuh can get twenty thousand for yore fiddle in the East? Or any place?"

His visitor's eyes lowered. "No," he answered. "It's a fine old instrument—a Stradivarius—but you can't tell what a violin will bring in cash. First you've got to find someone who wants it." He turned away. "All I know is I've got to have the money."

"So yuh thought I'd take a flier on yore fiddle," Vidlak said, and smiled thinly.

His years in the gambling spots of the West had made him a shrewd judge of people. He believed in the young man's desperate need, and wanted to help him.

"I don't have ten thousand cash with me at the moment," he said. "Mebbe if yuh'd tell me why yuh wanted it—"

"I want it to pay a debt," the young fellow said eagerly. "The violin's worth the money." He leaned across the table, his eyes searching the gambler's face. "I can't let you have it now, you understand," he said. "You'll have to wait until after the concert tonight. Mebbe by then you could let me have the money."

"I'll have to think it over," Vidlak said. "Come to my room at six. I'll give yuh my answer then. Yuh're Joseph Widman, ain't yuh?"

The other nodded. "How'd you know?"

"Read about the benefit concert on a poster. Yore last name seems kind of familiar."

"My grandpop owns the Box W. Maybe you've heard of him?"

"I remember now," Vidlak muttered. "Yuh've been away, studyin' music. New York, Boston, Europe."

"I've been every place except where I belonged!" Joe Widman said bitterly, and walked heavily from the room.

"Now what do yuh reckon he meant by that?" John Vidlak mused.

THEN, remembering that the concert was for the benefit of the proposed Dennison Hospital, he knew where he could likely find the answer. He got his hat and headed for old Doc McKay's office. Doc had dreamed of building a hospital in Dennison for twenty years.

John Vidlak found Doc thumbing through a medical journal. The old medico glanced up, caught the glitter of gold across his visitor's vest and shoved to his feet.

"I'll be a run-down spleen!" he greeted, and held out a fat, stubby-fingered hand. "If it ain't Watches John Vidlak!"

Vidlak shook the outstretched hand warmly.

"Sit down," McKay invited, "and let me listen at that chest of yours. Always worried about it ever since you went through the ice and come up with pneumonia."

Vidlak laughed. "That chest is as sound as a dollar," he said. "You know yuh wouldn't let me out of yore sight till it was as good as new."

Doc grinned. He leaned forward, his keen old eyes bright.

"What's brought you back to Dennison, Watches?"

The gambler smiled. "Two things. I wanted to see you and Nancy again. And I heard that there was a poker playin' fool here by the name of Ace Strelo."

The old doctor nodded, and his eyes lost their twinkle. He was not thinking of Ace Strelo, though, but of Con Lyman. Lyman's grip on the town worried him more than he was willing to admit.

"Still running all over the country, tryin' to find your match at poker, eh?" he said.

Vidlak nodded. "That's right, Doc. How's Nancy?"

The twinkle returned to the old man's eyes.

"Nancy!" he bellowed. "Somebody here wants to see you!"

A pretty girl of about eighteen came into the room. She wore a nurse's white uniform that seemed to deepen the blue in her eyes and add extra color to her cheeks.

"Remember John Vidlak?" the doctor asked.

"Of course!" She smiled and held out her hand.

Vidlak stared at her. He remembered her as a gawky thirteen-year-old with red braids, freckles across her nose and an impish gleam in her eyes.

"If I was twenty years younger," he said, "I'd give up all my bad habits and settle down in Dennison. And the first thing I'd do would be to get sick again."

The girl laughed and turned to her father.

"I'm going to run over to see Mrs. Jarvis," she said.

After she had gone, the two men talked about old times for a while. Then Vidlak asked:

"When a fiddle player by the name of Joe Widman wants yuh to give him ten thousand dollars for his fiddle, what would yuh think, Doc?"

The old man sat up straight.

"Joe tried to sell you his fiddle, huh?"

Vidlak nodded. "I take it that he's in some kind of money trouble."

Doc shook his head. "It ain't Joe. It's his granddad, Tom. You remember the Box W?"

"Shore. The biggest outfit around here."

"Old Tom's losin' it, Watches," Doc McKay said unhappily. "He spent a heap of money on young Joe. Sent him to Europe. Bought him that fiddle. A Stradivarius, they call it. Then old Tom had a light stroke and lost the use of his legs. Things got bad at the Box W. I reckon there was some crooked work goin' on, too, since the old man couldn't look after things. Anyway, he's borrowed to the hilt from a man named Con Lyman."

"Heard of him," Vidlak said. "Runs the Emporium."

McKay nodded. "Old Tom trusted him —before he found out that Lyman was out to take over the Box W. Seems there's some talk of a new railroad crossin' Tom's land. Anyway, Joe come home to see his granddad, and the way Joe found things at home hit him mighty hard. He stayed, trying to get the ranch operating again. I reckon he wants to sell that fiddle to pay Con Lyman. He knows it will finish off his granddad to lose the Box W. And Joe won't let that happen if he can help it. Says he's goin' to stick right here and make things hum, and to heck with chasing around, playin' the fiddle."

"I see he's playin' for the hospital fund tonight," Vidlak commented.

McKAY'S eyes lighted.

"Yes, and people are comin' from all over to hear him. Watches, this concert will make the hospital possible. Thanks to Nancy!"

"Thanks to Nancy?"

"Joe and Nancy are going to be married," McKay grinned. "He's playin' this concert for her more'n for the hospital. We should take in about ten thousand. People are goin' to pay ten dollars a seat, and are not kickin' about it. They want to hear Joe play, and they want a hospital. You're going with Nancy and me."

Vidlak grinned. "I reckon I'll go. I'm right interested in that fiddle."

He could have added that he was interested in old Doc's girl and in Joe Widman, and in seeing to it that they had a chance at happiness, but he didn't.

Instead he glanced at his beautifully

engraved watch, and said:

"Doc, reckon I'll head back to the hotel and catch a little shut-eye. A feller wouldn't want to go to sleep at a ten-dollar concert, would he?"

The gambler departed, but he didn't go directly to the hotel. He stopped at the bank and asked to see the president.

The teller, a thin little man with a bald head, took one look at the six watch chains gleaming across the velvet vest, and smiled.

"Right this way, Mr. Vidlak," he said, and led the way to an inner office.

Old Joyce Kelley looked up from his littered desk. The first thing he saw was the gold-streaked velvet vest, and a smile broke the frown on his heavy-jowled face.

"John Vadlik!" he said. "How are you?"

"Fit and able, Joyce," Vidlak drawled.

It was then that he saw a young man sitting at a small desk in the rear of the room.

"This is my son," Joyce Kelley said. "Lewis, this is John Vidlak."

Watches' first swift glance showed him that Lewis Kelley had a weak chin, and he didn't meet Vidlak's level gaze.

"How do you do, Mr. Vidlak," he said stiffly.

"Well, John, what can I do for you?" the banker asked.

John Vidlak pulled an engraved hunting-style watch from the second pocket on the right side of his vest, pressed the stem, and the lid flew open. But it wasn't a watch—only a watch-case. He carefully turned the case upside down, and twenty glittering diamonds rolled out on the desk top.

"I want ten thousand dollars," he said quietly, "and here's the security."

Banker Kelley would no more have questioned the value of those glittering stones than he would have questioned the safety of his own bank vault.

Every banker in the West knew about John Vidlak's diamonds. Before a poker session he invariably turned them in at some bank for security, that after the game, he invariably paid off his loan and returned the diamonds to their nest of cotton inside the watch-case. Rumor had it that an expert had appraised those diamonds at fifty thousand dollars. But rumor was wrong. For the diamonds were worth only somewhere between twenty and twenty-five thousand dollars.

The banker sealed the gems in an envelope and made out the necessary papers for the gambler to sign.

Smiling a little, Kelley asked, "Who is it, Watches? Ace Strelo? Or Con Lyman?"

"It's a feller by the name of Stradivarius," the gambler answered with his little one-sided grin.

"Never heard of him," Kelley said, and headed for the vault.

Lewis Kelley closed a ledger with a little snap, put on his hat, and went out without even glancing at Vidlak.

The old man returned with a package of crisp hundred-dollar bills. Vidlak didn't bother to count the money.

"Thanks," he said, shoving the money into his coat pocket.

He buttoned his coat over the watch chains and sauntered out into the sunny street. It was still early afternoon, so he turned toward the Emporium. He could do with a drink before taking a nap, and he was curious to know what Ace Strelo looked like. Maybe, he could also catch a glimpse of this Con Lyman.

JUST as he pushed at the right half of the double batwing, the left half swung outward. Lewis Kelley stepped into the sunlight, and hurried on down the street. He didn't lift his eyes to Vidlak's face.

The gambler went up to the bar, and ordered beer. The light caught at the gold chains as he opened his black coat. Eyes widened, and lips whispered:

"Watches John Vidlak!"

Three men sat hunched at a back table under a green-shaded lamp. One of them was Trigger Pool. The one with a pasty face, Vidlak had never seen before. The third, a man with bushy eyebrows, seemed vaguely familiar.

At a nod from the third man, Trigger shoved to his feet and crossed to Vidlak.

"Like to have yuh meet a couple of friends of mine," he said tightly.

"I met some of yore friends once," Vidlak drawled.

Pool stiffened. "Con Lyman and Ace Strelo want to talk to yuh," he said flatly. "Of course, yuh don't have to meet 'em."

He went limping back to the table.

CHAPTER III

Death at the Concert

A THIN smile turned up one corner of Vidlak's mouth as he watched the retreating Trigger. So the man with the bushy eyebrows called himself Con Lyman. Vague memory told Vidlak that something here smelled, but he wasn't sure what.

He finished his beer and sauntered to the table under the lamp with the green shade. Trigger made the introductions.

Ace Strelo nodded and let his washed-out smoky eyes wander over the expanse of black velvet vest. Con Lyman smiled, all but his steel-blue eyes. They were filled with that look of insatiable greed.

"Glad to meet yuh, Vidlak," he said smoothly. "Want to join us in a little game in my office?"

The smile didn't leave Vidlak's lean face. He read what was in Lyman's eyes, saw Strelo's lips thin, noticed a quick ticking vein in Trigger Pool's temple.

"Ain't got a lot of time right now," he drawled, "but I might play a hand or two."

They went into the office.

"Just a little friendly game," Lyman said in a silky voice.

"Nothin' like a little friendly game for gettin' acquainted," Vidlak said, and selected a chair that put his back to the light.

The others sat down. Vidlak pulled the upper right-hand watch from its pocket, snapped it open, and to the astonishment of the three men, poured twenty-dollar gold pieces from the case to the table.

"That ought to do for a starter," he drawled.

Lyman nodded and broke the seal on a new desk. They cut for deal, and Trigger Pool came up with high card.

The deal went around the table twice. Vidlak lost a little, won a little. Strelo lost some, and Trigger checked out, broke. Lyman was the winner, and he beamed.

Lyman's deal came up. His fat fingers riffled the cards, and his steely eyes studied Vidlak's quiet face. Vidlak seemed half asleep. Suddenly Lyman shoved the deck toward Vidlak for the cut. Vidlak's mouth twisted into its half grin.

"The game's over," he said, in a dry, flat voice.

He picked up the deck and fanned the cards out on the table. There were only two aces in the deck.

Sweat broke out on Con Lyman's flabby face as Vidlak's scornful eyes were fixed on it.

"I never play with cheats!" he said.

He scooped up the gold pieces and returned them to the watch case. His eyes went to Ace Strelo. The pasty-faced man sat still, his long fingers on the table, his smoky eyes without expression.

"As yuh know, Strelo," Vidlak went on quietly, "I'm not referrin' to yuh. You play the kind of a game I like. I hope we'll meet again sometime."

Lyman's face was livid. He leaped to his feet, and his hand moved toward a shoulder holster.

"So I'm a cheat?" he roared.

Vidlak's hand dropped toward the lower right hand pocket of the velvet vest. A slim brown finger twisted at the heavy gold chain.

"Yuh're a cheat," he clipped. "And if I was you, I wouldn't touch that gun!"

Lyman's eyes turned toward Trigger Pool. The little gunslinger stood with his back against the wall, hands well away from his twin Colts. He wasn't having any part in this. Lyman dropped his hand away from his open coat.

"Got to catch up on my sleep," Vidlak said, grinned, and backed through the door.

Outside in the bright sun, he evaluated the two men. Lyman was crooked. Strelo was a square poker player and a good one. But dangerous.

Vidlak dismissed Lyman with a shrug. He had no time for tinhorn gamblers. But he was as tricky as a rattler and twice as treacherous. Besides, there was something disturbingly familiar about the owner of the Emporium.

Vidlak dropped in to see his old friend, Sheriff Ancil Floyd.

"Thought I'd like to look over some of them old dodgers yuh've always got layin' around," he drawled.

"Help yoreself," the sheriff said. "Goin' into the man-huntin' business, Watches?"

"Nope," the gambler answered, grinning. "Just refreshin' my memory."

HE LEAFED through the dodgers.

"Beats all," he remarked, after a time, "how a man can change in eight or ten years."

"Yuh wouldn't want to tell me what this is all about, would yuh?" Sheriff Floyd asked.

The gambler's fingers slid along one of the gold watch chains. He shook his head.

"Not yet, Ancil," he replied. "It'll keep. Besides, there's a few things I want to look into first."

He said good-by to the sheriff again and went out into the sunlight. For a moment he thought he saw young Lewis Kelley watching him through the plate glass window of the bank across the street, but on second glance, he saw no one was in the window.

In his room at the hotel, Vidlak hung his long black coat over a chair back, and sprawled across the bed. He fell asleep instantly. When he was awakened by a persistent pounding on his door, he opened his eyes to find the room almost dark. A glance at his watch told him it was seven o'clock.

"Who's there?" he called.

"Joseph Widman," a voice answered.

Vidlak opened the door. Joe Widman came in, and the gambler lit a lamp. Then he noticed that his coat no longer hung on the chair back. It lay in a crumpled heap on the floor near the window.

One corner of Vidlak's mouth twisted upward.

"Yuh're late, Joe," he said.

Widman missed the double meaning.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I got to practicing some music, and before I knew it, it was after six."

"It's all right, Joe," Vidlak said. He picked up his coat and hung it on the chair. The pockets were empty. "I still don't have the ten-thousand dollars."

Joe's face fell. "I'd sort of counted on it."

"Is tomorrow the day yore grandpop's supposed to pay Con Lyman?" Vidlak asked.

Widman nodded. "He didn't tell me until this morning. It'll kill him if . . . How'd you know about it?"

"I've been talkin' to Doc McKay," Vidlak answered. "If yuh still want to sell yore fiddle in the mornin', Joe, I'll buy it. Now, run along and get ready for yore concert. I'll be there, and I don't want to hear no wrong notes."

Joe Widman gave him a grateful smile, opened his mouth to say something, then turned and ran through the door.

Vidlak put on his black coat and ran long fingers down into the empty pockets.

"Only one feller knew I had all that money, besides old Joyce Kelley," he mused. "And that was old Joyce's son, Lewis."

He remembered meeting Lewis at the door of the Emporium, and one corner of his mouth curled slightly.

"Of course," he thought, "young Kelley might have mentioned that ten thousand to a couple or three skunks."

Vidlak wandered down to the dining room and ordered his dinner. The place was crowded, and he surmised that many of these people had come to Dennison to attend the concert. Not wanting to attract attention, he kept his coat buttoned over the six gleaming watch chains.

When he had finished dinner, he went out into the darkening street, lighting a cigar. Lights gleamed from the old opera house, and people were beginning to gather in the street. Doc McKay and Nancy came for him, and the three of them got into the line in front of the opera house.

The first half of Joseph Widman's concert went off with the polish and precision of a fine-jeweled watch. Joe knew the kind of music his own people liked, and played it. Familiar tunes that he had arranged so that they were heart-gripping and beautiful.

John Vidlak's keen eyes missed nothing. He saw the tears in Nancy McKay's eyes, the look of pride on old Doc's face, saw how people listened to the fine violin. And he saw Con Lyman and Ace Strelo in a side balcony seat.

But no place did he see Trigger Pool or young Lewis Kelley. Or the banker. Then he remembered that old Kelley, as treasurer of the hospital fund, had been in charge of the ticket booth.

INTERMISSION came and Vidlak, with others, wandered into the lobby. As Vidlak lighted a cigar he saw Con Lyman and Ace Strelo leaning against the wall. Deliberately looking away from them, he noticed that the ticket window had been closed. That would mean a capacity house.

As he strolled along a side passage along the building outside, stretching his long legs, he thought he heard a faint cry above the noise of the crowd behind him. He paused and listened. The cry was not repeated.

A door at the lobby end of the passage opened, and Trigger Pool stepped out. He didn't see Vidlak, and hurried into the swarming lobby.

Vidlak ran to the door, through which Trigger had come, and swung it open. Inside, a light burned, showing him the interior of the ticket booth. And sprawled on the bare floor, his head in a pool of blood, lay old Joyce Kelley, the banker. He was dead, and a tin money box beside his outstretched hand was empty.

The gambler closed the door softly and headed into the crowd of laughing people. His eyes whipped about, searching for the ferret-faced little killer. Then he spotted Trigger, dodging in and out, heading for Con Lyman and Ace Strelo—and hugging a bulging canvas bag under his coat!

Sweat stood out on Trigger's thin face. He had never killed a man before like this. Always before it had been the blast of a six-gun, not the crunch of skull bones. That crunch had left him unnerved.

Con Lyman saw him, and knew instantly that something had misfired in his carefully laid plan to get the hospital money. Ace Strelo knew it, too. When Trigger came up, the three of them quickly moved away from the crowd.

"Lewis Kelley wasn't in there," Trigger chattered hoarsely. "It was his old man. He started to fight—and I had to let him have it!"

"I thought we was goin' to play this safe," Ace Strelo said tightly.

"Shut up!" Lyman said. "This is a bad break, but—"

Trigger wiped his clammy face. "Why yuh reckon young Kelley went back on us?"

"I don't know," Lyman clipped. "But I do know there'll be the devil to pay when it's found out that old man Kelley has been robbed and killed. Killin' a man like Kelley ain't no laughin' matter."

Strelo's smoky eyes burned. "Yeah," he said, "and if the Law finds out yore real name and yore record, yuh'd better be leavin' Dennison pronto."

"Mebbe nobody'll find out about Kelley," Lyman growled. "Ace, slip back to the ticket booth, lock the door and keep the key."

Strelo gave the big man a piercing look, then melted into the milling crowd.

Lyman leaned close to Trigger.

"Trigger," he whispered, "yuh're goin' to set fire to this place! Folks'll be so excited about savin' their own necks they won't worry about old Kelley and the money till the place is burned to the ground. Then it won't matter."

"The—the devil I am!" the little man chattered.

The big man's fingers dug into Trigger's bony shoulder.

"There's a room back of the stage. full of old scenery and paint and junk. Yuh can get into it from the alley. That's the place to start a fire."

Trigger licked his thin lips. "Arson's out of my line."

"Mebbe hangin's out of yore line, too," Lyman snapped. "Listen—with the Box W spread comin' our way and a chance to make plenty when that new railroad crosses the land, we don't want any killin' gettin' in our way. We—"

"Good evening, Mr. Lyman," a high-pitched voice said.

Pool and Lyman whirled. The bald-headed teller in Joyce Kelley's bank stood there.

"Too bad about Mr. Kelley and his son, isn't it?" he said, in the tone of one who loved to purvey gossip. "They had another quarrel this afternoon, and Lewis walked out. He's leaving town on the ten-fifteen. Say's he's going East to live." He smiled at the Emporium owner. "I thought you'd like to know. I know you're one of Lewis' friends."

NOT noticing that for a moment Lyman was speechless at the news, the teller wandered on, shaking his bald head.

"Trigger," Lyman barked, "before yuh start the fire, find Lewis Kelley and bring him to me. Yuh'd better head for the depot right now."

"Where'll you be, Boss, when I bring him back?" Trigger asked.

"Down under the stage—in the orchestra room. Yuh can reach it from the alley. Lewis and his old man might as well burn in the same fire."

Trigger went limping away.

Watches John Vidlak had seen all that had happened since Trigger Pool had shoved the canvas bag into Con Lyman's hands. He had seen the three men in worried conversation, had seen Strelo move away. Then he had watched while the bank teller had stopped to speak to Lyman, and what he had said had made Lyman and Trigger exchange startled glances.

By the time Vidlak had worked his way through the crowd to Lyman, Ace Strelo had returned. And nearby stood Doc McKay, looking for Vidlak. Doc reached the gambler just as Vidlak stepped up to Strelo and Lyman.

People were beginning to move back into the auditorium now, leaving the lobby almost deserted.

Vidlak gave Doc his one-sided grin.

"Looks like I'll have to miss the rest of Joe's fiddlin', Doc," he said. "Ace Strelo and me are goin' to have us a poker game. There ought to be an empty room around here."

"This is no time for that!" Lyman growled hoarsely.

His voice choked. For John Vidlak's hand had moved to the lower right-hand watch chain. The glittering chain came out of the pocket. But there was no watch on the end of this chain. Con Lyman found himself looking into the black muzzle of a gold-trimmed derringer held in a steady hand.

"I think this is the time!" Vidlak said. "What do you think, Strelo?"

ACE STRELO'S face remained expressionless.

"I agree," he drawled. "There's a room under the stage we can get to through this side passage."

"Not there—" Lyman began.

"Reckon I'll sit in on this game," Doc McKay said. "Nancy's used to havin' me called away. She won't worry if I don't show up."

The gold-trimmed derringer disappeared into the silk-lined pocket.

"Lead the way, Strelo," Vidlak said. "You next, Lyman."

Strelo turned through a narrow door that led into the side passage. He didn't look back and he didn't hurry.

Lyman followed. But his flabby face was a dusty gray.

CHAPTER IV

Poker in Perdition

SMILING thinly, Vidlak stepped along behind the two men, and he could hear Doc McKay puffing a little as he followed. Watches had a feeling that more was going on here than he understood. He was disturbed about Trigger Pool's disappearance, and would have given a stack of twenty-dollar gold pieces to know what the bank teller had said to Con Lyman.

Reaching the end of the passage they saw Joe Widman returning to the stage to continue the concert. Without a glance at the violinist, Strelo led the way to the room beneath the stage.

Doc McKay found a lamp, lit it and set it on a battered and dusty piano. The white piano keys made a tooth grin in the light.

A small table stood in the center of the room. Vidlak blew the dust from the top of it. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Lyman and Strelo exchange winks. He saw Lyman's hand sneak toward the gun at his shoulder.

"Hold it!" Vidlak clipped.

His fingers twisted at the watch chain, and the gold-trimmed derringer leaped from his vest pocket. It gleamed wickedly against the gambler's black vest.

"Take their guns, Doc," Vidlak said.

Grinning, Doc obeyed.

Vidlak dropped the gun back into the vest pocket. He drew an unopened deck from a pocket and laid it in front of Strelo.

As Strelo broke the seal, footsteps sounded on the stairs. Vidlak stiffened. Two men were coming down those steps, and one of them walked unevenly. That would be Trigger Pool. Vidlak lifted the gun from his pocket.

The door swung inward, and Trigger Pool shoved a man carrying a suitcase into the room. Lewis Kelley! Coming so suddenly from darkness into light, Trigger was momentarily blinded. He did not see the man standing by the battered piano.

"I found him, Boss," he said, shoving Lewis Kelley forward. "And what yuh reckon I found in his pocket?"

"What did yuh find?"

That voice didn't belong to Con Lyman, and Trigger Pool's blood ran cold. His eyes came into focus now, and he saw the toothy grin of the white piano keys. Then he saw old Doc McKay leaning against the piano, two gun-belts slung over one fat shoulder. One of the belts was a shoulder-holster outfit. That was Con Lyman's. The other with the brass bucklet was Ace Strelo's.

Trigger's eyes shifted to the small table in the center of the room where three men sat. Strelo and Lyman—and Watches John Vidlak!

The little killer caught his breath. The black-vested gambler had a gun in his fist, a small gleaming gun with its business end pointing squarely at Trigger.

"What did yuh find in his pocket?" Vidlak repeated harshly.

Trigger remembered his game leg and the small caliber slug that had been dug out of it.

"Money," he answered hoarsely.

"Unbuckle yore guns and drop 'em on the floor," Vidlak said quietly. "Then bring that money to me."

The ferret-eyed man obeyed. The guns clattered at his feet, and he limped up to the table and laid down a package of crisp bills.

Vidlak's quick fingers flipped through the money, all one-hundred-dollar bills.

"Kelley," Vidlak said, "tell 'em where yuh got this."

Kelley moistened his dry lips.

"Out of your coat pocket," he said weakly. "This afternoon when you were asleep. I owed Lyman a gambling debt. It was either help him steal the concert money—or get out. I thought your money would give me a new start. Through your open window I saw you asleep when I walked along the alley, saw your coat hanging on a chair."

VIDLAK slid the derringer into his pocket, picked up the money and laid it beside three stacks of twenty-dollar gold pieces he had emptied from three watch cases. Faintly from overhead came the strains of music.

"There's ten thousand in this package," he said. "My money. With the gold it makes quite a stake, Strelo. Care to count it?"

Strelo shook his head. "It's a stake I can't match," he said.

"I reckon Lyman'll be willin' to match it for yuh," Vidlak drawled.

Sweat was oozing down the flabby cheeks of the big man. Vidlak saw it, and smiled.

"I don't have much with me," Lyman said.

"Yuh've got ten thousand, or more—money yore little killer took from the ticket booth!" Vidlak said coldly. "Also, yuh can write a release of the mortgage yuh hold on the Box W. That, and the ticket money'll cover my bets."

Lyman's face turned greenish. He started to his feet and again found himself looking into the gold-trimmed derringer. He slumped back into his chair and tossed the canvas bag on the table. Ace Strelo dumped the money out and began to stack it.

"Paper and pencil, Doc," Vidlak said.

Old Doc McKay laid his prescription book and a pencil stub on the table.

"Get busy, Lyman," Vidlak said.

Lyman picked up the pencil and began to write shakily.

From above, came a sudden silence. Then a woman's muffled cry cut through it, followed by a shuffle of feet. The music grew louder, as if Joe Widman were trying to cover the confusion.

"We've got to get out of here!" Trigger Pool yelped. "The cussed place is on fire!"

"How do yuh know?" Vidlak demanded.

Pool only turned and made a break for the door.

"Stay where yuh are!" Vidlak's voice, as brittle as old window glass, froze the little gunman in his tracks. "Cut for deal, Strelo," Vidlak added quietly.

Ace Strelo's washed-out eyes fixed on Vidlak's face.

"Why play?" he said in a dry voice. "Yuh've got me across a barrel—win or lose."

Vidlak smiled. "When anybody wins from me, he gets what he wins, no matter who he is, as long as he plays a straight brand of poker."

"I'll play," Strelo said.

Abruptly the music overhead stopped. Along with a babble of voices came a dull roaring like wind through dead timber. The music began furiously.

"We'll be caught in here like rats in a

trap!" Lyman panted. "This place'll burn like paper!" He turned fiercely on Trigger Pool. "Why didn't yuh wait till we got out of here before yuh fired the place?"

Pool cursed and took a menacing step toward the big man.

"How'd I know we'd be stuck down here on the end of Vidlak's gun?"

Vidlak shoved to his feet. "Doc," he said, "looks like the game'll have to wait. We got to see that folks get out of here."

"Wait till I go up and have a look-see, Watches," Doc said.

As he waddled through the door, Vidlak, his fingers on the gold-trimmed derringer, watched the men in front of him. Pool's face was flushed with furious anger. Lyman's breath came hard and fast. Lewis Kelley looked too sick to care what happened. But Ace Strelo merely rolled a cigarette and lit it.

Doc came hurrying back.

"Everything's under control," he reported. "Joe's playing his fiddle like a fire was part of the program, and folks are behavin' themselves. There's no panic—they'll all get out. So," he added slyly, "I reckon there's no need to bust up this game."

Lyman started for the door. "I'm gettin' out!" he panted.

"Doc." Vidlak's voice rose menacingly —"shoot the first lobo that makes a break for the door!"

Doc McKay lifted a gun from a holster and thumbed back the hammer. Lyman stopped stock-still.

A CRASH of sandbags from the stage rigging sent a shower of dust dribbling down from the ceiling. The door fanned open, and smoke billowed into the room. Doc kicked the door shut.

"This is the closest to perdition I've ever played poker," Ace Strelo said, and calmy dealt two hands.

They played cautiously at first, placing small bets, feeling one another out for weaknesses. Neither man seemed to be conscious that there was a fire near, though the smell of pine smoke and dust grew thick.

At last, Strelo lifted his eyes.

"I'll open," he said, and shoved a thousand dollars into the center of the table.

Vidlak's eyes brightened. Now the game had really begun. He moved two stacks of twenty-dollar gold pieces into the pot and followed them with the package of hundred-dollar bills.

"I'll take one card," he said, "and it'll cost yuh everything yuh got to see my hand."

Strelo tossed his cards on the table. "I ain't playin' this hand for that kind of money," he said tonelessly.

Vidlak smiled. He hadn't as much as a pair of deuces in his hand. His bluff had worked. Or had it? He couldn't tell by Strelo's blank expression.

Sandbags and scaffolding crashed overhead, and the stage floor, that was the ceiling of the little room, sagged. Trigger Pool started for the door again, saw Doc McKay lift the six-gun, stopped and cursed.

"Time's runnin' out on us, Watches," Doc said.

Vidlak nodded, and picked up his cards. Two aces, a king, a trey and a ten. Strelo opened again. Vidlak discarded the trey and ten.

"How many, Strelo?" he asked evenly.

Strelo's face showed a flash of life. "One," he answered, and shoved all his money into the center of the table.

Vidlak's eyes burned. This was it. This was the big play. If they could stay here only a few minutes longer—

"Yuh cussed fools!" Lyman screamed. "We'll be burned alive!"

"Shut up!" Doc McKay rasped, and centered the gun on Lyman's chest.

"Drawin' for a straight," Vidlak reasoned. "Likely got both ends open. About one chance in five he'll hit. Or mebbe he's runnin' a bluff. Either way, if he don't draw to his hand, chances are I got him whipped."

He shoved the pile of hundred-dollar bills into the pot, dealt one card to his opponent and two to himself.

Ace Strelo picked up his draw card. A thin smile twisted his lips, and he laid three queens face up on the table. He had been bluffing about drawing to a straight, but his hand packed a powerful wallop.

Vidlak turned up his first draw card. A five of diamonds. He tossed it away, thinking that his chance of beating Strelo now had been halved. He turned up the second draw card. An ace of clubs! He laid the other two aces beside the draw card.

Ace Strelo shrugged. "It was a good

game while it lasted," he said, and shoved to his feet. "How about us gettin' out of here, Watches?"

Vidlak gathered up the money and Doc McKay's prescription book and jammed them into his pockets.

A heavy crash from above caved in the left side of the stage, and a shower of flaming debris came through into the room.

Vidlak grabbed Doc and shoved him toward the door.

Con Lyman's face had turned a mottled purple. He leaped to where Trigger's big sixes lay and whipped one of them from a holster.

"I thought yuh could play poker!" he yelled at Ace Strelo, and emptied five shattering slugs into the man.

Trigger Pool saw this through the haze of dust and smoke and his own fear. He remembered how often Strelo had loaned him money. Rage at Lyman tore through him.

He caught up the second gun, triggered a bullet into Lyman's back and lifted the big six for a second shot.

He never fired it. The stage collapsed above his head, and the big stage piano dropped through. Trigger never knew what hit him.

Vidlak shoved Doc McKay through the door and up the short smoke-choked stairway. Doc knew the way out. They groped their way through a passage, the walls hot under their hands, reached an outside door and the sweet night air. Lewis Kelley followed at their heels.

"Everybody back!" a voice boomed in warning.

HANDS clutched the three men and dragged them away from the flaming building. The walls sagged, collapsed, and red flames licked high into the black sky.

"But everyone got out!" someone screamed hysterically.

Vidlak knew that was not right. Four people hadn't got out—old Joyce Kelley, Ace Strelo, Trigger Pool and Con Lyman. His mouth twisted into its one-sided grin, but there was no mirth in it.

"That was the hottest finish to any poker game I ever played," he said to Doc. He added to Sheriff Floyd, who had just come up, "Con Lyman, alias Cam Lyvers, the embezzler, won't be givin' you or anybody else any more trouble."

"Con Lyman—Cam Lyvers!" Floyd barked.

Vidlak nodded. "I saw him one time in Kansas. Thought I remembered them eyebrows when I saw this feller yuh called Con Lyman. When I looked through them old dodgers in yore office, I spotted him for shore."

Vidlak drew the sheriff aside then, and told him the whole story of what had happened in the basement room. . . .

The next morning when Watches John Vidlak rode his high-strung roan past Doc McKay's place in the bright sunlight, Doc, Nancy and Joe Widman stood in front of the office. Nancy's coppery hair gleamed in the sun, and she was a picture worth remembering. Young Joe, holding her hand tightly, looked mighty happy. Old Doc looked happy, too, but a little hollow-eyed from his experience of the night before.

"Come back sometime, Watches!" the oldster called.

"Good-by and good luck!" Nancy and Joe cried together.

The gambler lifted his hat in farewell and rode on. He felt a deep satisfaction at the way things had worked out for everyone concerned.

Doc McKay would have his hospital. Joe still had his violin and he had Nancy—and Nancy had Joe. Joe's granddad still owned the Box W, with all debts canceled. No charges had been made against Lewis Kelley, but he was a sad and a much wiser young man because of what he had been through. Someday he might even make as good a citizen as his father had been.

As for Watches John Vidlak, he had had his game of poker with stakes greater than mere money, and against a man who knew the game. He had won, and once again the diamonds and the twenty-dollar gold pieces lay snugly packed in the watch cases.

Some day, some place, he would meet another great poker player, and that was all he ever asked out of life.

Where the trail entered a wooded valley, he turned to wave again. His long black coat gaped open, letting the sun glitter on the six smiling gold chains across the black velvet vest.

We can't see much because of the smoke but we can hear that pheasant bird making tracks for parts unknown

PHEASANT HUNGRY

By L. P. HOLMES

When the meanest man in all the West tries to pin a killing on a pair of addled saddle pards, Sheriff Bosco gets busy!

I AND "PUGGY" JIMPSON are holding down the Y Bar line camp at Bald Peak for Steg Yancy and cussing the old hairpin plenty. The grub packer is going on two weeks overdue and I and Puggy are getting right plumb down to rock bottom as far as eating is concerned.

"That's Steg Yancy for yuh," growls Puggy. "Stingiest old coot unhung. Figgers a human bein' should put in a lifetime eatin' bacon and beans and never get tired of the fodder. Got a notion to go out and beef me a Y Bar critter and cut me a whoppin' big steak."

"You do," says I, "and Steg Yancy'll hang yuh higher'n a dead pine. Yuh know, Puggy—I been thinkin'."

"Whoa!" says Puggy, quick-like. "Stop right there, Ike Ferris. Last time yuh started thinkin' we durn near got lynched for hoss stealin'. So from here on, when you start thinkin', I ain't listenin'."

I don't let that stop me, because I'm gettin' pretty wolfish for a piece of fresh meat, myself. So I says:

"I been thinkin' that mebbe old Shoo-fly Davis might have hung up one of them goats of his and if we amble over there and talk real polite, mebbe we might be able to moch a chunk."

Puggy gets a sort of dreamy look in his eye.

"I ain't never hankered for a hunk of billy-goat meat before," he says, "but then I ain't never been so sick of bacon and beans before, either. Let's go."

"Shoo-fly" Davis lives over in the Yucca Basin in a lath and tar-paper shanty and he runs a flock of scrawny-looking goats that any self-respecting peon would be ashamed to own. How he scratches out a living is a puzzle there ain't no answer for, but he does, and most generally he's got a jug of pretty good snake-juice around the premises, too.

When we ride up, there's Shoo-fly taking it easy in the shade of the shanty, and what's more, he's got a jug along side him.

Puggy, his eye on that jug, steps out of his saddle plumb pert.

"Billy-goat meat or no billy-goat meat, Ike," he says, "it don't look like this ride has been a complete waste of time and effort—Hi-yah, Shoo-fly! How's things?"

"Weary," grunts Shoo-fly. "Weary. Grab yoreselves a chunk of this shade and have a snort."

I AND Puggy hunker down and pass the jug back and forth two or three times.

"How did yuh know I had a jug over here?" Shoo-fly asks.

"Didn't," says Puggy. "Ike and me come lookin' for a chunk of billy-goat meat."

Shoo-fly rears up some. "You let my goats alone. You fellers go scraggin' one of my goats and I'll fix yuh!"

Puggy shoves the jug at Shoo-fly.

"Calm down and have a snort," he advises. "Ike and me ain't aimin' to scrag one of yore goats. We were just hopin' mebbe yuh'd already scragged one and had a chunk of the meat left. We are," Puggy adds, kind of sad, "that hungry for fresh meat."

"Huh!" grunts Shoo-fly. "Why don't yuh beef one of Steg Yancy's critters? I would, was I that hungry."

"Why don't we spit in a tiger's eye and then give it first bite?" comes back Puggy. "Have another snort and talk sense."

Shoo-fly does—and he does.

"There's a goshamighty big flock of quail hangs around that water-hole over at Chinquapin Glades," he remarks. "Long about this time of day they go in to water. Was yuh to sneak up real careful yuh could ground-swipe 'em and get a whackin' big mess of mighty fine fresh meat. Yuh split 'em open and daub 'em with flour and fry 'em in bacon grease and—"

"Shut up!" says Puggy, licking his lips. "Only one thing wrong with that idea. We ain't got no gun to ground-swipe 'em with. Only gun we got is that old hogleg of Ike's, and he couldn't hit a flock of barns with it, let alone a flock of quail."

A few shots of liquor always gets the hackles up on my pride, so I comes right back at Puggy.

"You need showin', I'll show yuh."

I pulls out that old six-gun of mine and cuts down on a digger pine about thirty yards away. A chunk of bark flies off.

Puggy squints an eye. "Not bad, not good, either. A little left of center."

"That's where the heart is, ain't it?" I comes back. "Just a little left of center."

"That ain't puttin' no quail in the fryin' pan," says Shoo-fly. "I'm gettin' all lathered up over the idea of a mess of quail, myself. I got a gun that'll ground-swipe 'em. Loan it to yuh."

"Trot her out," says Puggy. "Ike and me are goin' quail huntin'."

It's an old double-barrel, muzzle-loading shotgun that Shoo-fly produces.

"Don't yuh do no missin'," says Shoo-fly. "Only powder and shot I got left is in that there gun right now. You go in real easy, you let them quail bunch up good, then you lather 'em."

"Both barrels?" asks Puggy.

"Both barrels. And if the quail ain't there, you keep yore eye peeled and mebbe you'll get a whack at that old pheasant rooster that hangs out around Chinquapin Glades."

"That old what?" asks Puggy. "Ain't never heard of one of them pheasant things. What is it?"

"It's a bird," Shoo-fly tells him.

"A eatin' bird?"

Shoo-fly rolls his eyes and smacks his lips.

"Mister, if yuh ain't ever et pheasant, why then yuh ain't ever et."

"What's it look like?" demands Puggy. "How big is it?"

"Big's a chicken," Shoo-fly explains. "All red'n black and gold, with a great long tail. When it gets up it's all whoosh and roar and cackle, and it'll scare the pants off yuh if yuh ain't expectin' it. For a bird that big it shore can high tail, so yuh don't want to waste no time cuttin' loose at it."

Puggy sticks out his chest. "Let 'er whoosh. Won't scare me none. That there pheasant shows up, I'll lather it, plenty. Let's have another snort, Ike, and get goin'. . . ."

Chinquapin Glades is about three mile from Shoo-fly Davis' shanty. I and Puggy come up on the south side of the glades and leave our broncs there. Then we start moseying in real quiet and easy, aiming to Injun up on that water-hole and ground swipe them quail before they know we're around. Puggy's out ahead, packin' that old scatter-gun of Shoo-fly's and I can hear the locks snick as he drags both hammers back to full cock.

On the ride over we'd talked about that there pheasant bird and decided it was just one of them kinds of birds that come out of a whisky jug, like pink elephants and such. Likewise, Shoo-fly havin' a wild imagination and being a durned old liar to boot. So we ain't worrying none about pheasant birds. I and Puggy are looking for quail.

WE DODGE through a mess of chinquapin brush and hit a little meadow of saw grass, about knee high. On the far side of that meadow is another line of brush and past that brush is the water-hole. We begin stepping high and easy, which is easy to do, now that the snake-juice we got out of Shoo-fly's jug is beginning to take hold.

Right about then—*whango!* Somebody lets loose a shot, just past that brush ahead. Puggy blows out a cuss.

"Yuh hear that, Ike? Some lizard-faced son's beat us to them quail, gol-blast his thievin', ornery hide!"

Then it happens. Right up out of that saw grass not twenty feet in front of us, bounces this here pheasant bird. It is just like Shoo-fly said it would be. All red and black and gold with a great long tail. There's a whoosh and a roar and a cackle, and while I ain't exactly a nervous sort, generally, that durned bird cuts its wolf loose so sudden like, I come within a ace of swallowing my cud of black-strap.

I see Puggy's hat lift right up on top of his head, then he's jumping back right into me and lettin' go with that old scatter-gun. *Blam! Blam!*

When Shoo-fly said that all the powder and shot he had was in that cannon, he sure wasn't lying. He could have said that all the powder and shot in Cactus County was in the gun and still been within reaching distance of the truth.

Puggy, shooting so sudden like, never even gets the gun to his shoulder. It's kicked plumb out of his hands and the butt hits me in the middle. It's like I've been kicked by a mule. Knocks me down and Puggy falls on top of me. We can't see nothing because of the smoke, but we can hear that pheasant bird leaving fast, making tracks for parts unknown.

"Yuh missed it," gulps I to Puggy. "Yuh missed it—both barrels."

But Puggy ain't listening to me. He's listening to something else, and right away, so am I. It's taking place in that patch of brush between us an' the water-hole. There's brush a-crackling and smashing and squealing, and there's men cussing. I and Puggy stay right where we was, staring bug-eyed.

The powdersmoke thins out a trifle and we see 'em. Two of 'em. Broncs with riders. Them broncs sure are turning theirselves inside out and both riders are pullin' leather for dear life and cussin' forty to the minute.

Right away I savvy things, being quick that way.

"Yuh miss that bird a mile," I tells Puggy, "but yuh shore lathered up them two jiggers and their broncs. They get them two bangtails straightened out, I and you is apt to lose our scalps. I'm leavin'."

Which I does, *poco tiempo!* At that, I don't get back to where I and Puggy had

left our broncs more'n half a jump ahead of Puggy, and him lugging that old cannon of Shoo-fly's, too. We hit leather and light a shuck, and our broncs are runnin' neck and neck when we hit Shoo-fly's shack.

Shoo-fly, he's there, but not payin' any attention. He's flat on his back, snorin', that jug cuddled loving like in the circle of his arm.

Puggy puts the cannon inside the shanty door, starts back to his bronc, and hesitates.

"Wonder did the old hooty-owl leave a couple of snorts in that jug, Ike?" he says. "I feel like I could stand one—a big one."

There are four or five snorts left, big ones. I and Puggy swap that jug back and forth until she gurgles empty. Then we light out for home.

I and Puggy can carry our liquor like men, providing we keep away from excitement and stay out of the sun. But there'd been considerable excitement, what with Puggy missing that pheasant bird, both barrels and instead lathering up them two mean-looking hombres and their broncs. And there is no way of riding from Shoo-fly Davis' shanty to the line camp without getting in the sun.

So soon's I and Puggy get home we sort of slide out of the leather easy-like, crawl into the shade of the line camp cabin and settle down to quiet our nerves. Next thing I remember, somebody is shaking me, vehement-like, and I look up to see the big, tough mug of Sheriff Bosco Bates looking at me.

In some ways I'm delicate-like. Being shook up by Bosco Bates makes my head ache and turns my stomach over, putting a taste in my mouth like a goat corral. I tells Bosco that and he tells me to shut up, while he asks Puggy some questions.

PUGGY, he's hunched up against the cabin, holding his head in his hands, gentle-like. And he's kind of groaning.

"I tell yuh it was a accident, Bosco," he mumbles. "Ike and me was huntin' quail. This here pheasant bird comes up a-snortin', right under our feet and we cuts loose with both barrels, shootin' quick-like. We never had any idea we'd miss that pheasant bird and kill Jake Ryan. We're plumb sorry about that, Bosco. Jake Ryan was a good gent and besides he was a friend of ours. Ike and me would certainly never have killed him a-purpose."

A jiffy before I'd been kind of hot and sweaty. But when I hear what Puggy says, it is like I'd been doused clear past my eyes in a tub of ice water. The whole world, instead of being a sort of bilious yellow, turns cold and blue-black.

"Yuh—yuh're draggin' yore rope, Bosco," I gulps. "I and Puggy, we ain't never killed Jake Ryan. We ain't never killed nobody. We didn't even kill that pheasant bird."

"Yuh're both a pair of whisky-soaked liars," growls Bosco Bates. "You killed Jake Ryan. Yuh slaughtered him and left him layin' out there by the water-hole at Chinquapin Glades, flat on his back, drilled through and through. So I'm takin' yuh both to Cactus City where I'm lockin' yuh up, plenty tight. And by and by the State'll hang the pair of yuh, plenty high. Get up and get goin'!"

I and Puggy, we're near weeping when we fork our broncs. We tell Bosco Bates over and over that we'd never have killed Jake Ryan on purpose. Why, we loved Jake Ryan! That's what we tell Bosco Bates.

But Bosco, he won't listen. He can be a tough hombre, Bosco can, without no compassion at all. He just herds us along, and come dark, I and Puggy are locked up in the Cactus City bastile.

It ain't the first time I and Puggy have seen the inside of that calaboose, being there twice before, once being accused of bronc stealing, which Bosco Bates finally finds out we never did, and once when "Tug" Stevens, of the Casis, tries to charge us twice for a round of drinks. It is plumb accidental that in the argument, Tug gets hit over the head with a bottle and that the bar mirror gets busted. We tried to tell Bosco Bates that, but he wouldn't listen, as usual.

Some fellers might have felt sort of used to that lock-up, third time around. Sort of like they was at home. But not I and Puggy. I reckon I and Puggy must have some eagle blood in us. Being caged up don't agree with us. And to top it all off, what do you think Bosco Bates brings us in for supper? Yep, that's right. Bacon and beans.

Puggy puts up a holler. "Listen here, Bosco Bates! Yuh can lock Ike and me up, yuh can charge us with killin' Jake Ryan,

but yuh can't feed us sow sides and beans. You and Steg Yancy must be blood brothers. What Ike and me crave is a couple of steaks—big ones."

"What you jiggers crave and what yuh get, is twice different," comes back Bosco, mean-like. "You'll eat bacon and beans or yuh won't eat. And when the State gets through stretchin' yore necks, no kind of food will interest yuh, nohow."

Having been out of the sun for a spell, I'd get around to being able to think again. So I says to Bosco:

"Listen, here. Yuh said that Jake Ryan had been drilled, through and through. How yuh goin' to drill a man through and through with a load of bird shot—or two loads, for that matter?"

"Jake was drilled with a forty-five slug," says Bosco. "You jiggers ain't foolin' nobody with this talk about bird shot."

"I and Puggy never did no shootin' with a forty-five," I comes back, quick and sassy, feeling sure I had Bosco cornered and all ready for the tie rope. "Nobody goes quail huntin', or pheasant bird huntin' with a forty-five hogleg. So yuh ain't got a thing against I and Puggy and yuh can turn us loose, right here and now."

Bosco steps over and shakes his finger under my nose.

"When I rounded you two jiggers up," he thunders, "you had a forty-five tied to yuh, Ike Ferris. It had been shot and the empty shell was still in the chamber. Ain't a lick of sense in yuh tryin' to lie yoreself away from evidence like that."

I blink a couple of times and try and corner Bosco again.

"I shoot that shot over at Shoo-fly Davis' place. Puggy says I couldn't hit a flock of barns with that old hogleg and I showed him I could hit that digger pine out past Shoo-fly's shanty."

"Likewise and besides," puts in Puggy, "neither of them gents we lather up with bird shot was Jake Ryan. Jake's got red hair and a red beard. Them two hairpins is both clean-shaven. Yessir, Bosco, yuh're chasin' yore tail in a circle. Ike and me demands yuh turn us loose."

TO WHICH Bosco just laughs, right out loud. So I says:

"Either yuh turn us loose, Bosco, or yuh go get Steg Yancy and bring him in here, so I and Puggy can talk to him. We been workin' for Steg and he'll get us out of here in jig time."

Bosco laughs out loud, and louder than ever.

"Somethin' you jaspers don't know, seems like," he jeers, making ready to leave. "Steg Yancy is the one who swore out the warrant against yuh, chargin' yuh with killin' his friend, Jake Ryan. . . ."

I and Puggy have been two days in the Cactus City lock-up and are feelin' lower'n the underneath side of a snake in a wagon track.

"If Bosco Bates brings any more bacon'n beans around," says Puggy, "I'm goin' to throw a fit, a great ol' buster of a fit, with foam at the mouth and all the other fixin's."

Having been thinking again, I says so. Puggy just groans, but he's got to listen, less'n he wants to put his head under a blanket.

"Now you take Steg Yancy," I begins. "What—"

"You take him," cuts in Puggy. "I don't want no part of him, ever. Here we was workin' for him, good and honest, eatin' his old bacon'n beans an' sufferin' over every cussed mouthful. And what does Mr. Steg Yancy do? Why, he swears out a warrant chargin' us with the killin' of Jake Ryan."

"I'm thinkin' back to when Steg Yancy started out in this country," says I. "Everybody knows that when he hit here all he had to his name was a fast gun and a wide loop. Now he's got the Y Bar, the biggest cow outfit round about. Any gent who makes hisself top dog with nothin' more to start with than Steg Yancy had, does so by trompin' on the necks of whole slathers of his feller men."

"An' by feedin' his cowhands bacon and beans," puts in Puggy, sour-like. "Three times a day, seven days a week, four weeks a month."

"Shut up!" says I, aimin' to stop Puggy before he cracks his brains, gettin' into them higher mathematics, and likewise so I could go on chasing this line of thinkin' I'm workin' on. "Now there was Bee Donelson, who once owned the Sugar Loaf Meadows, best piece of winter range I know of. But Bee is now dead, found drug to flinders by his bronc. And Y Bar cows are thick as flies around a busted

molasses jug, in Sugar Loaf Meadows. Then there was Pete Payson, who owned the Jackass Wells water-holes. Pete just plain disappears and ain't heard of no more until his bones is found, scattered around in the malpais country back in the Starvation Hills. And now Y Bar cows drink water regular at Jackass Wells."

"Can't yuh think of more pleasant things?" complains Puggy, fretful-like. "We got miseries enough of our own without you draggin' in a flock of ghosts."

But I'm going full out, now, like a sight-running hound dog.

"Chinquapin Glades is the best brandin' ground in this stretch of country. Good grass, good water, lots of both. Jake Ryan owned Chinquapin Glades. But Jake is dead, now. How much yuh bet, Puggy, that come fall brandin', old Steg Yancy'll find it plumb convenient to be usin' Chinquapin Glades?"

Puggy makes a pass at a blue-bottle fly that's buzzing around plumb annoying.

"Yuh'd ought to sort of remind Bosco Bates of them things, Ike, next time he shows up," he says, kind of thoughtful.

"I aim to," says I.

But Bosco don't show up and I and Puggy gets hungrier and hungrier.

"First he feeds us the same old bacon'n beans," moans Puggy, "then he quits feedin' us entire. Bosco Bates ain't human. He figgers to let us starve."

It's plumb afternoon before Bosco shows up, and when he comes in, lugging a couple of big trays, he's got a new look to him, sort of cold around the mouth and with a hard gleam in his eye.

"Dig in, boys," he says, kind of gentle-like. "You and me got things to do."

Puggy takes one look at his tray and lets out a yelp of delight. I take a look at mine, and likewise. For we're lookin' at a pair of steaks big as doormats. I and Puggy do more than break our fasts. We dang near founder ourselves. And Bosco Bates, he justs sits there, patient-like, waiting for us to finish.

Puggy settles back, licking his chops and reaches for his smoking.

"Up to now, Bosco," he says, "I been thinkin' evil of yuh. I take it back. You got a streak of white man in yuh, after all."

Bosco smiles, grim-like. "Wait'll tonight's tomorrow," he says. "Maybe yuh'll be thinkin' mean again. Come dark, us three and one other will be takin' a little ride."

Puggy grunts, like he's been kicked sudden-like.

"Yuh ain't meanin' one last ride are yuh, Bosco?"

"Could be," says Bosco. "But I don't think so. Either way, we'll all be in it together."

With that, he gathers up the trays and goes out. Puggy looks at me and says, kind of plaintive:

"Start thinkin', Ike—and see can yuh figger an answer to that."

I'm still thinking when dark comes, but I ain't got no answer. . . .

She's a powerful dark night as I and Puggy and Sheriff Bosco Bates rides into Yucca Basin and up to Shoo-fly Davis' shanty. And there's Shoo-fly hisself, up on his old crow bait bangtail, waiting for us. I and Puggy been fighting our heads, all the way out from Cactus City and this shore ropes and ties us.

"Just what is which around here, anyhow?" I says to Bosco. "What kind of a snipe hunt we goin' on, Bosco?"

"There's just three gents I know of in these parts," Bosco says, slow-like, "that ain't more or less under the thumb of Steg Yancy, owin' him money or some such. Them three is you hairpins. I figger I'll have to make a pretty rough ride tonight, where I could stand a smidgin of help, so I'm makin' a posse of you three."

"Yuh mean," says Puggy, eager-like, "that mebbe we'll get a chance to tie a knot in Steg Yancy's tail, Bosco?"

"Mebbe three-four knots—big ones," says Bosco.

"Then," says Puggy, tough-like, "yuh got yoreself one great whopper of a posse, Bosco. Lead on!"

Bosco does and by and by we ride up to Jake Ryan's cabin on Gumbo Crick, which pore old Jake won't never live in no more. Bosco leaves us with the broncs and sets out to sort of scout things, quietlike. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly settle down to wait.

"Yuh're a pair of greedy vultures," Shoo-fly says. "I know there was half a dozen good snorts left in my jug when I went to sleep, and you fellers drained her dry. Fine way to treat a friend."

"You should talk," comes back Puggy, plumb peckish. "Between you and yore

old scatter-gun and that cussed pheasant bird, Ike and me come near bein' stretched for killin'. Mebbe we will be yet."

Bosco comes back then.

"All clear," he says. "Here's what we do. I'm goin' to lay up inside the cabin. Shoo-fly, bein' as you ain't much bigger'n a lizard, and twice as patient, yuh'll be flat on the roof, right over the door. Ike, you and Puggy will be hid out against each end of the cabin. Don't nobody do anything until I yell. When I do, gather 'em in."

"Gather who in, Bosco?" I asks.

"Why, Steg Yancy, of course, and whoever is with him."

"If he's got the whole Y Bar outfit with him, that shapes up as considerable of a chore," says I.

"He won't have," says Bosco. "Most of the Y Bar crowd are pretty good boys, too good to be workin' for such as Steg Yancy."

"How'n thunderation yuh know that Steg Yancy will come prowlin'?" Puggy wants to know. "Did he tell yuh he would? And comin' to think about it, what do yuh want him for, anyhow?"

"Never mind, to both questions," Bosco says. "I know what I'm doin'. Now, let's get set, while the settin' is good. We'll leave the broncs right here."

So, pretty soon, there we are. I and Puggy are hid out against the ends of the cabin, Bosco is inside, and Shoo-fly Davis is spraggled out on the roof over the door like a toad in the moonlight. Only there wasn't no moonlight. It is darker'n sin, and plumb chilly.

Time fugited, as the poet feller says. Must have been way past midnight and I am gettin' plumb sleepy and cold, and have just about got it figgered out that Bosco Bates is crazy as a sheepherder when, sure enough, I hear the sound of broncs a-coming. They come up and stop about twenty yards out in front of the cabin. I make it out there's three of 'em.

Then I hear Steg Yancy talking. Once you hear Steg Yancy talk you never forget his voice. He talks through his nose, thin and pinched and whining, like it hurts him to give off a word without being paid for it.

"You two fellers," says Steg, "sort of prowl the premises an' keep yore eyes peeled, while I'm inside trailin' down that deed. Mebbe I'll find it quick, then again mebbe I'll have to tear the cabin down. But I got to find it and I aim to find it, if it takes a week. So keep wide awake and on yore toes."

I hear saddle gear creak as they get down, then spur chains scuffle as they start prowling. Steg, he goes right up to the cabin door, pushes it open and goes in. Them two jiggers with him split up to circle the cabin, one coming my way, one going Puggy's way. They're a cinch to bump right into I and Puggy and I'm trying to figger what to do about it before Bosco gives the yell to set us off, when all tarnation busts loose in the cabin.

BOSCO gives the yell, all right, and there's a couple of shots besides. The jigger heading for my corner spins around to head back to the cabin door when I lights all over him clawing and scratching. I've got my old hog-leg, which Bosco has give back to me before we start on this ride. I yank it out of the leather and aim me one great big whop at my jigger, figgering to part his hair, plenty.

I'll tell a man I did me a job. I nail him square with the barrel and he goes down like he'd been petted with a post maul. About then Steg Yancy comes busting out of the cabin, squalling like his shirt tail was afire. Shoo-fly Davis takes off, coming down like a big old hooty owl diving on a rat. Him and Steg Yancy hit the ground, all tangled up, fighting like a pair of locoed bob-cats.

I run in to help Shoo-fly and somebody kicks me right on the belt buckle. I kick back and Shoo-fly lets out a screech.

"Lay off'n that spurrin'! Yuh skun me from fetlock to hock. Lay off the spurrin' and grab a holt of this old tarantula. Look out—he bites!"

Between I and Shoo-fly, we get Steg Yancy stretched proper by the time Bosco gets there to help. Bosco, he snaps a pair of hand-cuffs on Steg Yancy, then we look around to see what else is going on. My jigger is still out, plumb cold, whilst Puggy has got his man eared down and pretty sick, what with Puggy slugging him with both fists, forty to the dozen.

We pull Puggy off and help Bosco tie up this jigger, good and tight. We go back and tie up my hairpin, too, who's beginnin' to groan and wiggle some. Shoo-fly sticks out what he calls his chest.

"Bring 'em on, Bosco!" he crows. "Bring on the whole danged county! I'm a fightin' man this night, I am. Bring 'em on!"

"These three'll do," says Bosco, dry-like. "Lug 'em inside while I get a light going."

They're kind of scuffed up, them three, when we get 'em in where we can look at 'em in the lamplight that Bosco's got going. My gent looks pretty good from in front, exceptin' that his eyes is glazed and there's a knot on his head big as a apple. Puggy's gent, he's punched plumb crooked, whilst Steg Yancy, he looks like he's come off second best with a cornered buzz-saw. Shoo-fly Davis ain't very big and he didn't have much time to work on Steg, but he shore did hisself proud, all things considered.

Remembering them shots I look around the cabin for gore, but there ain't none, exceptin' a little mite of it tricklin' down the side of Bosco Bates' neck, where there's a red mark like somebody's touched him with a hot iron. Bosco is lookin' plenty tough about now as he glares at Steg Yancy.

"Yuh could have looked from now till doomsday for that deed, Yancy, and yuh'd never have found it," says Bosco. "Because I gathered it in the day yuh killed Jake Ryan. It's locked up in the safe at my office, right now."

I and Puggy jump like somebody's stuck a pin in us. What is this we are hearin'?

Steg, he swallers kind of thick and whines:

"Yuh're loco. Bates. I don't know what yuh're talkin' about."

"We'll see," shoots back Bosco. "Ike, take the shirt off that jigger yuh cow-tailed. I mean that—take his shirt off his danged back."

I take it off. It tears kind of easy, once I get it started. Shoo-fly takes a look, squawks, and starts for the door.

"Small-pox!" he whoops. "Let me out of here."

"Naw!" rasps Bosco. "Bird-shot. Puggy, see can yuh tear a shirt as neat as Ike."

Puggy can, and does, and his man is marked just like mine. Puggy begins to gulp and stutter but pretty soon he gets it out.

"Them's the two jiggers Ike and me lathers up when we misses that pheasant bird!"

"Right!" growls Bosco. "And there was a third one which you jiggers didn't see. Shoo-fly, you do a job of shirt tearin'—on Mr. Yancy."

You could see it hurt Steg mortal to hear his shirt begin to rip, for it must have cost him all of a dollar.

"Bird shot here, too!" Shoo-fly yelps, lookin' eager.

Bosco justs nods, and looks a little meaner than before.

"All right," he growls. "Which one of you three centipedes threw the slug that killed Jake Ryan? Or do yuh all want to hang for the job?"

There's about a minute, a long one, where nobody moves or speaks. Then Puggy's hombre begins to sweat and shuffle his feet.

"Yancy did," he blurts out.

My cuckoo nods stupid-like and mumbles, "That's right. Yancy did."

"I figgered so," says Bosco. "Just wanted to hear you jiggers say it. Now we'll get the broncs an' head back for town. . . ."

IT'S a week later. I and Puggy is holed out at Shoo-fly Davis' place. Shoo-fly's broke down and scragged one of his goats and we aims to take a larrup at it later on. But mainly, Shoo-fly's dug up another jug and I and Puggy and him are squatting in the shade of the shanty, working on it.

Bosco Bates rides up, grins plumb across his face, lights down, has a snort and gets out his smokin'.

"Got it all figgered out yet, Ike?" he asks.

"Some," I says. "When I and Puggy is Injunin' up on them quail at Chinquapin Glades, we hears a shot—the shot that killed Jake Ryan, only right then I and Puggy figger that somebody has beat us to them quail. About then, that pheasant bird shyshoots and Puggy, bein' a little nervous on the trigger, lets go both barrels into the brush and lathers up Steg Yancy and them two pug-uglies he's got with him. They been hidin' in the brush waitin' for Jake Ryan to come along so's they could gulch him.

"When I and Puggy lights a shuck out of there, Steg Yancy sees us goin' and

figgers the best way to cover up his own tracks is to accuse us and swear out a warrant agin us. I and Puggy got her figgered that far."

Bosco nods. "Yuh're shootin' bulls-eyes at every jump."

"What whips us though is why you throws Ike and me into the jug?" says Puggy. "And what this deed business was all about?"

"I locks you two up to make Steg Yancy figger he was foxin' me," explains Bosco. "That deed business—well, when Bee Donelson was dragged to death, or supposed to be, I never could find no deed or document in his belongin's to prove he actually had title to Sugar Loaf Meadows. So when Steg Yancy began movin' his cows in there I couldn't prove the property belonged to somebody else. Same thing about Jackass Wells, when Pete Payson disappeared. And both times, the gent who comes out with all the chips is Steg Yancy. This time, about pore old Jake Ryan, I figgered to get there first."

"How'd yuh guess just what night Steg Yancy'd be out at Jake's cabin, lookin' for that deed?" I asks, being sharp about such things.

Bosco grins and then takes another snort.

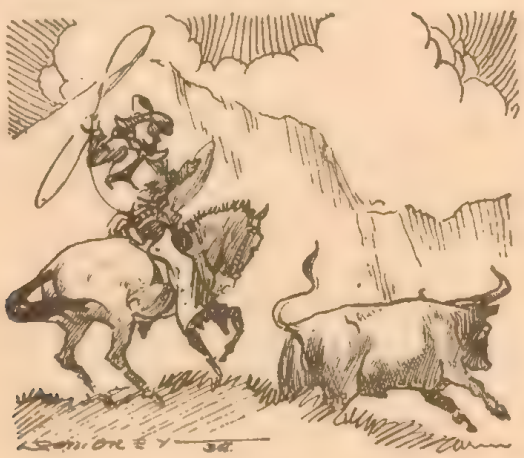
"I bumps into Steg and them two hairpins of his, in the Oasis," he says. "I notice the three of 'em keeps scratchin', like they had the itch—or bird-shot. I drops the remark, so Steg could hear, that next day Sam Adams, the District Attorney, and me were goin' out to Jake Ryan's cabin to check over all his effects and gear. I figgered it was a cinch that Steg would be out there that night. Which he was—as you fellers found out—aimin' to beat Sam and me to Jake's deed of ownership of Chinquapin Glades."

"All things considered," says Puggy, slow-like, "you ain't such a bad sheriff, Bosco. One thing about yore jail, though yuh'd oughter feed somethin' else than bacon'n beans."

Bosco grins, straightens up and steps into his saddle.

"Knowin' such," he says, "mebbe you and Ike will contrive not to board there so regular. So long, boys!"

I and Puggy reach for the jug at the same time. Puggy gets there first. But I don't mind, knowing she's still a good half full.



Sheriff Bosco Bates, Puggy Jimpson, Shoo-fly Davis, Ike Ferris and the other rollicking denizens of Cactus City will be back next issue in another howl of a yarn—

SNAKE EYES

By L. P. HOLMES

LOOK FORWARD TO A RIB-TICKLING HUMDINGER!

In the steadily beating wind, Clark was heading the herd to the bed grounds

SORTA TOUGH ON THE CATTLE

By STEPHEN PAYNE

"The Cows Must Go Through," is Smith Clark's code—and he gets them through despite storm, strife and peril threat!

THE small pond of foul water, misnamed Soda Lake, always reminded Smith Clark of a dark mirror in a heavy white frame. This frame was rank alkali upon which nothing grew.

Except for sparse grass, nothing grew on the wide plains surrounding it—no shrubs, no sagebrush, no trees and, for as far as the human eye could reach, there was no fence, no house, not even a lone sheepherder's wagon. Nothing, except the brown ribbon of road which led from Windcut across this desolate expanse toward canyon-scarred mountains against the western skyline.

On this bleak November evening that skyline was invisible, and the lake was churned and whitecapped by a brutal north wind. All of today, all of last night, and all of the day before, this wind had beaten steadily against Smith Clark as he made a hand with Guy Lowell's small beef herd enroute from the mountains to the loading pens at Windcut.

Still bracing his sturdy shoulders against the blast, Clark was now leading the one pack-horse, heading the herd along the north

rim of Soda Lake. They intended to make camp at its east end.

Although the man's hands and arms and feet were numbed to insensibility, and his lean-jawed face felt like a frozen mask, topped by blond hair, he uttered no complaint. He had always figured to hold up his end at any cowpunching job, taking the tough breaks with the good.

Just this one more night on the trail, and tomorrow the cattle would be yarded and loaded on the cars. His job with Guy Lowell would be over—and soon forgotten.

A grin quirked Clark's wind-chapped lips, and his wind-reddened eyes twinkled. Wrong! Not soon forgotten would be Guy Lowell's grouching and cursing, his everlasting bossing, his smug I'm-better-than-you and know-it-all attitude, and lastly, his welshing on the job.

For one other reason Clark would never forget this drive. Though neither mentioned it, both Clark and Lowell knew that for all of the six days they had been on the trail the shadow of a girl had stood between them.

GUY LOWELL, prosperous owner of the Double L, had been giving Marjorie Galen a great rush. Yet—so the rangeland grapevine reported—it seemed she couldn't completely forget a certain hired man on horseback named Smith Clark, and Lowell was still uncertain whether or not he was to become the one-and-only for Marjorie.

"Bluff" Galen, Marjorie's shrewd, four-square cowman dad, strongly favored Lowell, and once Clark had overheard him telling his foreman with marked irritation:

"A daughter's shore a puzzlin' critter, Jeff. Mebbe my little girl's seen too much of that triflin' Smith Clark."

Maybe, Clark agreed, seeing how he and Marjorie had sort of grown up together on Bluff Galen's Wagonwheel spread. From the ripe age of ten he had worked for the Wagonwheel, except when, every so often, Bluff Galen exploded over some impish prank or some downright boner and fired young Clark with the threat, "Never again'll I take yuh back!"

This disturbed happy-go-lucky Clark not at all, for come roundup or bronc-busting time, Foreman Jeff Harris always needed an expert cowhand who would cheerfully risk his neck breaking the Wagonwheel broncs, or chouse cows sixteen hours a day with never a whimper.

Late this fall Galen had again fired Clark. Reviewing the incident, while he prepared to pitch camp on Soda Lake, Clark recalled the old man's saying:

"Look here, dub, if yuh're ever goin' to amount to a hill of beans it's high time yuh buckled down to somethin' besides punchin' cows. This winter yuh blister yore hands on a pitchfork handle!"

"That nickname they tied onto yuh fits like a good saddle fits a hoss," Clark had chuckled. "Yuh won't be that tough on me. Yuh're bluffin'."

Five minutes later Smith Clark had had his pay check in the amount of seven dollars, and orders to pack his warsack and pull his freight.

"Needn't hang around in the hope of seein' Marjorie, neither," Bluff had growled. "She knows yuh're only a two-bit saddle-pounder who's never saved a dime."

Clark, who had never figured saving as either a virtue or a necessity, was almost gloomy serious as, astride his brown horse, Steady, he had headed over the hill. It must have been a quirk of Fate that he met up with black-browed Guy Lowell, who usually passed the cowpuncher with a mere nod. On this day, however, he surprised Clark.

"Say, feller," he had said, deep-voiced, "I wonder can Galen lend me a man to help drive my beef to Windcut?"

It had been Lowell's custom to sell his marketable cattle to some local buyer. This year he had obviously decided to do his own shipping, and was short of help. Clark knew some of the reasons why hired hands never worked long for this man, but he couldn't afford to be choosy.

"I'm footloose, Guy," he suggested.

After a momentary hesitation, during which it was possible that Guy Lowell considered the pleasure he would have in bossing this particular hand and riding him hard, Lowell made up his mind.

"Yuh're on," he had said.

They had clashed early the following morning, when Clark learned the kind of trail drive his new boss contemplated—a two-man pack-horse outfit with an extra saddle horse for each rider.

"Should be at least three of us," the cowpuncher had argued. "Handlin' a pack-hoss and doin' all our own cookin' makes a sight of extra chores. Especially when we've got to

night-herd."

"If there are extra chores you'll do 'em," Lowell had said tightly. "Don't forget I'm the boss."

Clark had quirked one sandy eyebrow.

"Yuh ain't likely to let me forget it, Guy . . . Now this here grub supply. With six nights on the trail we should have—"

"I've set out the stuff we'll take. S'posin' yuh shut up and pack it on that hoss!"

And that initial clash had proved a good example of Lowell's domineering arrogance for all of the six days they had now been on the trail. Heretofore, cowmen and foreman with whom easy-going Smith Clark had worked had treated him as an equal, had acted human and had done their share of the work, with no thought or idea of being superior to the hired man on horseback. But this trip Clark had not only been unable to develop any remote sense of camaraderie with his boss, but he had done two men's work.

HE HAD been mightily tempted to quit, but the code of the range wouldn't let him. When a man took a job he gave unstinted loyalty to his boss and his outfit. He did his best to hold up his end, and never, never quit an outfit or a herd in a pinch. And Smith Clark reckoned from the way Guy Lowell had "poured it on him" all these days and nights that the man knew well enough he wouldn't ride out and leave him in the lurch.

Now at the east end of the wind-lashed lake, Clark rode in widening circles looking for fuel with which to build a fire. Failing to find one scrap of wood, or even one dry cow chip, he shrugged weary shoulders and dismounted, bracing himself against the gale while he unlashed the pack and let bedroll, panniers and pack-saddle fall.

His puckered eyes found this camp site indescribably forlorn.

"Cheer up, nags," he said, with deep sympathy for the two dejected horses. "Tonight and one more day, then we can laugh about it. Ye-ah, and when campfire liars begin tunin' up, I'll say, 'Speakin' of wind, I mind the time when I crossed Windcut plains in a breeze that turned the steers' horns wrong side to. Shore was funny to see them critters with their horns pointin' back 'stead of forward.' "

From one of the panniers he took out a gallon can, once a syrup can, which he had filled with water back at the last campground. It was there he'd had his last meal, and his last smoke, for not even an expert cowhand could roll a cigarette in the fury of this wind. As the gale now almost ripped the can from his numb fingers, he realized that the precious water had leaked out.

Clark cursed with considerable feeling. Then he grinned. Guy Lowell was going to have something more to beef and grouch and swear about. This last night on the trail was sure going to be a honey!

Mounting, the cowpuncher rode out into the wind-churned puddle and bent from his saddle to fill the can. His thirsty horse sniffed of the water and raised its head, upper lip curled in scornful disgust.

"Persnickity!" Clark said. "Act like yuh'd been raised a pet."

He filled the small coffee pot from his can and then checked the food supplies, desperately hoping he would find something in one of the panniers which had been overlooked. But there was only a small chunk of bacon, some flour mixed with baking powder and salt, half a pound of ground coffee, a small can of salt, and a half-pint of blackstrap molasses.

If Guy Lowell had listened to Clark there would have been canned tomatoes and beans and crackers, something to tide them over tonight. As it was, the man who never admitted he was wrong and never forgot he was the boss would howl louder than a thwarted coyote.

The puncher's search had unearthed two iron picket stakes and a roll of cotton clothesline, and his gaze travelled from them to the bedroll. Last night Clark had driven the picket stakes deep in the ground and with the clothesline had firmly anchored the tarp-covered bed to keep it from blowing into seperate parts and sailing across the prairie. He had done this not for his own comfort or protection, for he had not been in the bed at all last night or even the night before. He had done it for Guy Lowell's comfort.

"I'd better stake her down again," he thought, and looked up to see his employer riding in, leading the two extra saddle horses.

"Why ain't yuh got a fire, Clark?" demanded Lowell.

"Want me to hack up the pack-saddle and burn it, Guy? Mebbe it'll give us enough wood to boil up some of this wet stuff out of the lake. Spiked with plenty coffee, it'll make a man beg for more."

There was no spark of humor in Lowell's dark eyes. His full-cheeked face was blue with the cold.

"Yuh've got a warped sense of humor, cowboy," he retorted. "Even the fool cattle won't drink this stuff, and the smell of it turns my stomach . . . Can't yuh find no wood?"

Clark shook his head. "Oh, well, what's the diff?" he drawled. "It'd take a heap sight smarter man'n me to make and hold a fire in this breeze. Reckon we'll take our eats cold and raw, and like 'em. Bacon and flour, Boss. And yuh'll love the new, improved way of serving coffee. Chaw on a mouthful and wash it down with—"

"Yuh ain't a bit funny," Lowell growled.

The wind caught his forty-dollar hat and swept it away.

"Get it, Clark!" he howled. "Get my hat!"

WATCHING the hat sailing like a kite and with the speed of the wind, Clark said:

"If yuh figger yore hoss can outrun yore lid, get it yoreself. I'll betcha four bits he can't . . . I mind the time Johnny Bates chased his brand-new skypiece fourteen-odd miles across these same plains, wore his nag down to a whisper, and never got within gunshot of the hat."

"Blast it, man, yuh could have *tried!*" Lowell cursed wind and country and cowpunching. "Talk about misery and grief and hard work! I'm fed up! And bareheaded I'll catch a horrible cold. Give me yore skullcap."

"No can do," said Clark.

His own hat was anchored to his well-shaped head by a leather thong. Otherwise he might have lost it fifty times today. Under the hat he wore a black silk skullcap, gift of Marjorie Galen. For that reason he would not part with it. However, from one of the panniers he produced a soiled rag.

"Tie this around yore noodle, Guy."

Lowell swung slowly and stiffly to the ground.

"Fix me up, Clark. My hands are too cold to tie a knot. What wouldn't I give for a big swig of whisky!"

Clark made an improvised cap, tying it in place with a portion of the cotton clothesline.

"Them black clouds yonder mean blizzard," he said, as he worked. "Bad water, no feed, no shelter. Sorta tough on the cattle. Tonight, Guy, the dogies are going to be fierce to hold."

"Rot. They're tired. They'll be glad to lay down. . . . Help me change my saddle to Prince."

Again the puncher helped his boss, saving Lowell's saddle blanket from following his hat down wind.

"Now you give me a hand," he suggested.

Instead, Lowell clambered into his saddle on the fresh horse.

"You'll make out all right on raw bacon and raw flour," he answered curtly. "Yeah, yuh're tough as a barbed wire fence. But I can't go it. I don't have to, now Windcut's within strikin' distance. You hold the herd. I'll be back after daybreak."

He had moved Prince forward when Clark's suddenly harsh voice stopped him and turned him half around.

"Shore yuh're the boss. But think what yuh're doin'!"

"Cuss it! I've got to see about the stock cars, and if we can get into the yards tomorrer."

Clark controlled his flare of temper. "That's a fine excuse! You know the stage driver told us—"

The rest was lost on the wind, for Lowell had goaded Prince to a lope. Through narrowed eyes Clark watched horse and rider diminish in the distance across the inhospitable expanse, and all his thinking was disturbed and roily. The stage from Windcut to the mountains traveled this road, and this morning the driver, Bob Yates, had stopped to make talk. Lowell's stock cars would be on hand and the stockyards empty tomorrow, Yates had reported.

Then he had given Lowell a letter, and Smith Clark had seen the address. It had been addressed to Lowell in Marjorie Galen's hand.

This letter had recalled to the cowboy that on the same day the rancher had fired him Bluff Galen and his daughter had been leaving the Wagonwheel on a hurry-up trip to Missouri to buy purebred bulls. It was highly probable that Galen and Marjorie, back from this trip, were putting up at Windcut tonight!

"Umphm," murmured Clark through tight, wind-chapped lips. "The letter told Guy she'd be there. Even so, the sonovagun hadn't no right to duck out on me!"

With sharp resentment aflame in him, he chewed on a handful of coffee and went about changing his saddle to Steady, his fresh horse. He had punched cows all his life, and he could make out to saddle in a forty-mile wind, single-handed.

It would be sweet revenge to burst in on Lowell and Marjorie at the hotel and say:

"You set the example of quittin' yore herd, Guy, so yuh've got no howl comin'. Go night-herd yore dogies yourself. I'll take over entertainin' Marjorie."

HE RECOGNIZED this thought as being little, mean, even contemptible, and hard on its heels crowded another. What would the spirited girl, whose brown hair was spun silk, say to him? Raised a cowgirl, the unwritten code of the range ran as strongly in her as it did in any puncher or foreman or cattle owner.

But Clark also realized that though a forty-a-month cowhand couldn't be stopped from dreaming, when he faced reality he had nothing to offer the girl. Lowell had everything, and Lowell had beaten his time. So it could make no difference now what Marjorie or her dad would think of Smith Clark. He would find a sort of wicked enjoyment in showing up Guy Lowell. After that, he would take himself to some new range.

Grabbing another mouthful of the coffee before the wind took the package, Clark stepped into his saddle and pointed Steady townward.

He had gone no more than fifty yards when a sound that lifted above the shriek of wind forced him to raise his bridle hand. The three hundred cattle in Lowell's herd had spurned the water of Soda Lake. Bellowing their thirst and their hunger and their disgust with this vile weather, they had about-faced and were taking the back trail. The trail home!

Yet even before the cattle attracted his attention, Clark had realized he could not desert them. He let go a heartfelt oath, wheeled Steady and loped to overtake the herd. The three extra horses, pack-horse and two saddlers, followed the cowboy, dropped in with the herd, and thereafter remained with it.

"Hoddoo, yuh knot-headed scrubs!" the puncher yelled, fighting to stop the dumb brutes and to turn them. "Plant yore hoofs and bed down. Hoddoo! Hikey!"

Sweat sprang out on Steady's brown flanks, and Clark no longer felt frozen. Working like a buzz-saw on a log, he turned the cattle, only to find that he could not hold them. They had no least idea of bedding down in this unsheltered country, and with the smell of the snowstorm carrying to them on the cutting wind.

They were determined to drift ahead of that wind, and no one cowboy on earth could stop them. With Lowell's help, inefficient though it was, Clark might have managed. But alone he had no chance!

Full darkness came on with a rush. Borne on the teeth of the gale, out of that blackness the blizzard came shrieking. Yet Clark was not giving up!

"Since they're so plumb set to travel, why not take 'em to Windcut?" he thought. "If I can force 'em to walk quarterin' to the wind instead of with it, I can do it."

Smith Clark pulled over to the right of the dark mass and, with rope and voice, and forcing his horse against the leaders, he finally turned the animals eastward. He couldn't see the road, or any landmarks, or even a star. But if he kept his left cheek against the wind he would be going in the right direction.

One thing was in his favor—the cattle, after being trailed for six days had become an integrated whole, sticking together like a band of sheep and following the leaders. Clark held those leaders to the right direction, moving on and on through the howling, dismal darkness.

As the increasing cold bit into Clark's bones, he recalled a brief notice he had read in the Windcut paper—"Sheepherder Found Frozen to Death." Except possibly the owner of the sheep, nobody paid much attention to such notices. Nobody would pay much more if the next issue of the Windcut *Sentinel* stated—"Cowpuncher F o u n d Frozen to Death."

Aw, shuckins! Nothing like that was going to happen. Yet although he was constantly kicking his feet against his stirrups, and slapping his hands against his body and legs, a cruel ache was running through his entire body. Worse still, loss of sleep and hunger were wearing him down at last.

He was fighting to keep awake. How he wanted to slide off his horse and lie down and let go! But he must take care of these jug-headed cattle. Must!

He became aware how stupid and groggy he had become when the herd rammed up

against a wire fence strong enough to bring them to a halt. A fence meant he was getting tolerable close to Windcut, where the road ran in a fenced lane. Now to force the cattle into the teeth of the snow-laden gale until they cross-cut the lane.

THE eerie, long-drawn, dismally forlorn whistle of a locomotive confirmed his belief that he was near the town. And as if that whistle were a signal, the hungry, thirsty, confused steers, silent for hours, responded with mournful and continuous bellowing.

"Like a man when he's up against it, cussin' to relieve his feelin's or cussin' his fate," Clark thought.

Spurring his weary horse to renewed efforts, yelling at the cattle, beating them with his rope, he tried to send them north into the wind, along the fence. All his superhuman efforts succeeded in doing was to keep the animals from drifting south.

Faithful old Steady was winded, his rider had worn out his arms and his voice, and the cattle were breaking past, heading south with the blizzard, when there came a shout:

"Yo-ho! Where are you?"

Clark thought he must have fallen asleep. He was imagining that he was still astride his horse, and working. He must either be dreaming or already dead, for it couldn't really be the voice of Marjorie Galen!

But a snow-plastered horse and rider loomed out of the white wall of the storm, the rider so heavily bundled up that at arm's length only her voice identified her to the cowpuncher.

"Am I thankful the cattle started bawling!" she called. "Otherwise I'd not have found you, Smith."

"Marjorie!" he croaked hoarsely. "Yuh shouldn't be out on a night like this!"

He heard the soft music of her clear laughter.

"I brought you Dad's cowhide overcoat," she said. "And overshoes and mittens, too. Can you put them on?"

"I'll make out to do it," the puncher replied.

Marjorie untied a bulky bundle from her saddle and helped him into overcoat, overshoes and mittens. At the moment he was too wonder-filled with the thought of her having come to find him that he did not clearly realize that if she had not he would

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have lost his life. That thought came later.

"I see you've got your skullcap," she said.

"It's the only thing that's saved my big ears. . . . Marjorie, yuh must get inside somewheres. And quick!"

"If you can take it, so can I!" she declared. "You're something like a quarter-mile south of the road. Were you trying to get the cattle to the stockyards?"

"Yes. They just wouldn't lie down, or stand still, so I took a chance."

"Well, let's finish the job."

Now that there were two efficient cowhands instead of one, they shoved the reluctant, stubborn, protesting cattle along the fence into the storm, arrived at the lane, and traveled along it.

Regardless of hunger and weariness, Clark was happier than he could ever remember being. Happier even than when he'd won his first job as a horse-wrangler on the Wagon-wheel. With Marjorie's help he was going to win out and yard those cattle!

But with victory in sight, disaster met the two riders. They were almost to the stockyards, north of town, the railroad tracks yet to be crossed, when a passenger train, its windows dim squares of light in the white veil of storm, came streaking along, and the herd took the back trail in a mighty surging rush.

Riding at top speed, Marjorie and Smith Clark stopped that run somewhere about one mile from where it had begun. After this, they could not drive the frightened herd back toward the stockyards.

The girl moved her horse close to the puncher's and for the first time Clark heard strain and weariness in her voice.

"What will we do?" she asked. "Camp here with them till daybreak and help comes?"

"No, Marjorie," he said firmly. "I can't and I won't have yuh stickin' it out here any longer."

"You'd do it if you were alone, Clark," she insisted.

"Shore. And I'll stick now. But you must get inside."

"No! I'm sticking too!"

NO GUY LOWELL about her! What had Guy told her, and what had she told him? How come, too, that her dad and Lowell had ever let her ride out into this storm?

"If we only could pick up a few milk cows, not scared of the tracks and the trains," Clark said wistfully, "we'd make it yet."

"Of course!" Marjorie agreed, so exultantly he wished he could see the expression on her face. Yet he had a picture of her in his mind's eye that he had kept for years. "Dad bought a carload of bulls," she went on joyfully. "Gentle, pokey things, most of them halter-broken. They're under a shed in the yards. Though I don't think I could drive them anywhere in this storm, I do believe I can lead a couple of them out here."

"And when yuh turn 'em loose they'll head back to the shelter of the yards!" declared the cowboy. "But one of us must stay with these spooky steers."

"All right," Marjorie said promptly. "You stay—and don't freeze. I'll be back soon."

A lump filled Clark's dry throat as he watched Marjorie vanish into the stormy night. It seemed as if a year went by before, at last, he heard her call. After riding around the closely packed, sullen herd, he made out that she had brought two bulls.

"They're ornery!" she called. "So you turn them loose."

Quickly he complied. Whereupon bulls and steers sniffed of each other, and set up a great bawling, which died away when the bulls, deciding they'd had enough of this odd treatment and of the storm, struck out for the stockyards. With Clark pointing the head, the steers followed, and this time no train appeared at an inopportune moment.

When the outer gate of the stockyards slammed shut behind the last steer, and the three Double L extra horses, Clark drew in a hard breath.

"We did it, Marjorie!" he exulted. "Now to put the little bulls back where they belong and feed the steers."

Here, protected by the numerous plank fences, Clark saw the girl eyeing him oddly.

"You've done enough," she declared.

"But these poor steers have had a powerful lot of grief. Yeah, this has been sorta tough on the cattle. They need hay before they're loaded out."

"'Sorta tough—on the cattle'!" the girl repeated with significant emphasis. "I'll remember that!"

Clark quirked his eyebrows and grinned.

"I get it!" he said. "Now I'll wake up old man Drake, who manages these yards. He'll be awful happy to roll out of his warm nest and scatter three tons of baled hay. . . Please

go to the hotel, Marjorie."

"I'm sticking with you, cowboy," she told him firmly, "till you say the job's done. . . ."

At half-past five the dining room of Windcut's main hotel opened for early customers, and two minutes later a young man and a girl selected a table and sat down. The man's face sported a week's growth of sandy whiskers and his red-rimmed eyes looked like burned holes in a blanket.

The girl's pretty, vivid face was unnaturally red. Her lips were chapped, and her large brown eyes were reddened as if she had been out in vile weather. But there was something in those lovely eyes which Smith Clark had not believed he would see there for him alone, of all men!

"Golly, to think I'm gettin' to eat breakfast with *you!*" he began, when a well-known voice in the adjacent lobby drew his attention.

"Shore I woke yuh up, Guy. Better be rattlin' yore hocks out to Soda Lake."

Marjorie looked steadily across the table at Clark, her lips tight, her eyes unsmiling, and through the open door he saw Guy Lowell and old Bluff Galen.

"What's the big yank, Bluff?" Lowell retorted. "Yuh told me that knot-headed cowpuncher was dependable. . . Well, I'll be hanged!"

He had seen Smith Clark, and Clark saw his mouth drop open, then close with a snap while his heavy, dark face turned white.

Lowell gripped Bluff Galen's shoulder.

"He—he's in there, Bluff. The low-down cur! Quit my herd and come to town! Gosh knows where my cattle are now!"

DUE to her position at the table, Lowell had not seen Marjorie. Galen shook the man's hand from his shoulder.

"Get away from me, Lowell," he said harshly. "I sort of spoke my mind last night. Can't yuh take a hint? We're through!"

At this moment the hotel clerk called:

"Drake at the stockyards on the phone, Mr. Lowell. Wants to talk to yuh."

"The devil with him!" barked Lowell.

"All right, Mr. Lowell. But Drake says he's got word yore cars are on the sidin' and the freight agent wants to know how soon yuh can load out."

"Load out! Ha-aa! What a laugh!" Lowell's own laugh was hollow. "It'll be a

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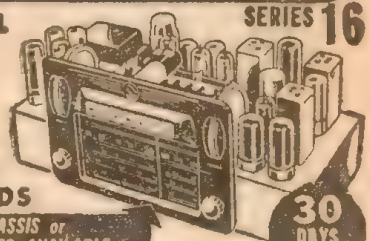

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week before I find my cattle, and they'll look like greyhounds instead of beef steers."

"Drake says yore steers are in the yards, filled up on hay, and restin' first-class."

"Thunderation!" Lowell gasped. "Let me talk to Drake!"

Bluff Galen appeared at the dining-room door, stopped and stared at the puncher and at his daughter.

"Marjorie Galen," he demanded, "how'd yuh get out of this hotel last night, without me seein' or hearin' yuh? I just now missed my coat and overshoes and mittens, so I know what yuh've done!"

"It wasn't hard," said Marjorie. "Of course I knew you wouldn't let me do what I had to do. I lied to the hostler at the livery stable, too, or I might not have got a horse to ride. . . Are you awfully mad, Dad?"

A broad smile broke Galen's face.

"Yes, Marjorie," he said, "as yuh can see, I'm a-boilin'. . . Well, Clark, I reckon if Guy Lowell's honest he'll figger out in time that the best man won. And Clark, it looks mighty like I'm goin' to have to give yuh a steady job for the rest of yore natural days. Somethin' I'll be unreasonably proud to do, son."

As Clark rose and gripped Galen's hand, he saw Guy Lowell having his look at him and at the girl he had lost. And he saw the man's arrogance and pride drain out of his heavy face, leaving it naked and ashamed.

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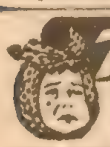

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

were taken to prevent it, Custer halted and sent out his chief scout, Bloody Knife, with twenty friendly Indian allies, to trail the departed Sioux. They had gone but a short distance when two of them came galloping back and informed Custer that they had discovered five Indian lodges a few miles down the valley, and that Bloody Knife had concealed his party in a wooded ravine, where they were awaiting further orders.

Taking E company with him, which was later reinforced by a number of scouts and Col. Hart's company, Custer proceeded to the ravine where Bloody Knife and his men lay concealed, and from the crest beyond obtained a full view of the five Indian lodges, about which a considerable number of ponies were grazing.

He was able to place his command still nearer to the lodges, undiscovered. He then sent the interpreter Agard, with a flag of truce, accompanied by ten Sioux scouts, to acquaint the occupants of the lodges, that he and his men were friendly and desired to communicate with them.

To prevent either treachery or flight on their part, he galloped the remaining portion of his advance and surrounded the lodges. This was accomplished almost before the Indians were aware of his presence.

A Council With the Indians

He then entered the village and shook hands with its occupants, assuring them that they had no cause to fear, as he was not there to molest them. All the time that the interpreter was telling the Indians these things they maintained a stolid expression, and one could not tell whether they believed the general's words or not. However, after the interpreter was through talking to them, the Indians dispatched a courier to the principal village, requesting the warriors to be present at a council with the whites.

This council was held on the following day, but though Custer dispensed coffee, sugar, bacon and other presents to the Indians, his advice to them regarding the occupation of their country by miners was treated with indifference, for which he observed in his official report, "I cannot blame the poor savages".

During the summer of 1875 Gen. Crook made several trips into the Black Hills to drive out the miners and maintain the government's faith, but while he made many arrests, there was no punishment, and the

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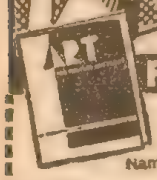

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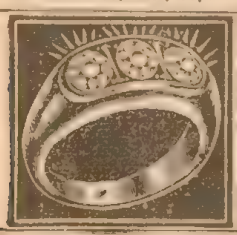

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whole matter became farcical. In August of the same year Custer City was laid out and two weeks later it contained a population of six hundred. These Gen. Crook drove out, but as he marched them from the place others swarmed in and the population was immediately renewed.

It was this inability, or real indisposition, of the government to enforce the terms of the treaty of 1868 that led to the bitter war with Sitting Bull which terminated so disastrously on the 25th of June, 1876.

Arms for the Redskins

Gold must have outweighed, with many men, their love and loyalty to their own country, for it is a notorious fact that the Sioux Indians, for four years immediately preceding the Custer massacre, were regularly supplied with the most improved firearms and ammunition by the agencies at Brule, Grand River, Standing Rock, Fort Berthold, Cheyenne and Fort Peck. Could it be that men, calling themselves loyal Americans, could foresee such an uprising if the Indians were armed—and could tell in advance that such an uprising would cause the government to close in on the Indians and wipe them out to the extent that gold-seeking on Indian lands would not be hampered?

In the months of May, June and July, during the campaign of 1876, just before and after Custer and his band of heroes rode down the valley of death, these fighting Indians received eleven hundred and twenty Winchester and Remington rifles, and 413,000 rounds of patent ammunition, besides large quantities of loose powder, lead and primers, while during the summer of 1875 they received several thousand rifles and more than a million rounds of ammunition.

With this generous provision, there is no cause for wonder that the Sioux were able to resist the government and attract to their aid all the dissatisfied Cheyennes and other Indians in the Northwest.

A Great Warrior

Besides having perfect fighting equipment, all the Indians recognized in Sitting Bull the elements of a great warrior, one whose superior, perhaps, has never been known among any tribe. He combined all the strategic cunning of Tecumseh, with the cruel, uncompromising hatred of Black Kettle, while his leadership was far superior to that of both.

Having decided to precipitate a terrible war, he chose his position with consummate judgment, selecting a central vantage point surrounded by what is known as the "Bad

Lands," and then kept his supply source open by an assumed amity with the Canadian French.

This he was the better able to accomplish, since some years before he had professed conversion to Christianity under the preaching of Father DeSmet and falsely maintained a show of great friendship for the Canadians.

Three War Expeditions

War against the Sioux having been declared, brought about by the combined causes of Black Hill outrages and Sitting Bull's threatening attitude, it was decided to send out three separate expeditions, one of which was to move from the north, under Gen. Terry, from Fort Lincoln, another from the east, under Gen. Gibbon, from Fort Ellis, and another from the south, under Gen. Crook, from Fort Fetterman. The movements were to be simultaneous, and a junction was expected to be formed near the headwaters of the Yellowstone River.

There followed what many military men of today call a series of blunders. The movements of the expedition did not go according to schedule. Communications with the expeditions were far from adequate. Gen. Crook's

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battle on Powder River is said to have been a blunder. It was reported to have lasted five hours and to have resulted in a complete destruction of Crazy Horse's village, but it is said that it allowed an avenue of escape for the Indians, and that they lost only a small quantity of their property.

The saddest of all is the report attributed to Gen. Crook that instead of there being 15,000 or 20,000 hostile Indians in the Black Hills and Big Horn country, the total number would not exceed 2,000. This report was misleading and far underestimated the number of Indians, and was one of the factors that caused the massacre.

Tremendous Odds

The Terry column, which was commanded by Gen. Custer, consisted of a total of thirty-eight officers and nine hundred and fifty-nine men, including scouts. The combined forces of Crook, Gibbon, Terry and Custer did not exceed twenty-seven hundred men, while opposed to them were fully 17,000 Indians, all of whom were provided with the latest and most approved patterns of repeating rifles.

On the 16th of June Gen. Crook started for the Rosebud, on which stream it was reported that Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse were stationed. About the same time a party of Crow Indians, who were operating with Gen. Crook, returned from a scout and reported that Gen. Gibbon, who was on the Tongue River, had been attacked by Sitting Bull, who had captured several horses.

However, what were deemed accurate reports were to the effect that Sitting Bull was still on the Rosebud, only sixty miles from where Gen. Crook camped on the night of the 15th. The command traveled forty miles on the sixteenth, and when within twenty miles of the Sioux principal position went into camp.

A Surprise Attack

The next morning they received a surprise attack from Sitting Bull. The battle waged until the middle of the afternoon, with Crook's command in a bad position, but finally the Sioux withdrew and Crook camped upon the spot and was inactive for two days.

With all the expeditions present in the section maneuvering to get the Indians in a pocket between them, a trail of a large band of Indian warriors had been reported and Custer was ordered to follow that trail, pushing the Indians from one side while Gen. Gibbon pursued them from an opposite direction. Custer, noted for his quick energetic movements, made ninety miles the first three days, and discovering the Indians in large

numbers, divided his command into three divisions, one of which he placed under Major Reno, another under Major Benteen, leading the third himself.

As Custer made a detour to enter the village, Reno struck a large body of Indians who ran him pell mell across Grassy Creek into the woods. He overestimated the strength of his enemies and thought he was being surrounded. Benteen came up to the support of Reno, but he too took fright and got out of his position without striking the enemy.

While Reno and Benteen were trying to keep open a way for their retreat, Custer sent a courier telling them of the big village and to come quick. Then, thinking that reinforcements were on the way, he charged the village, but instead of obeying orders Reno and Benteen stood aloof, fearful lest they should endanger their position, while the brave Custer and his squad of noble heroes rushed down like a terrible avalanche upon the Indian village.

Volcanic Fury

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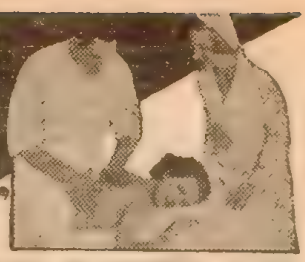

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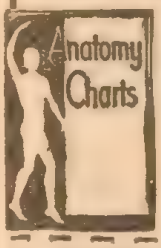

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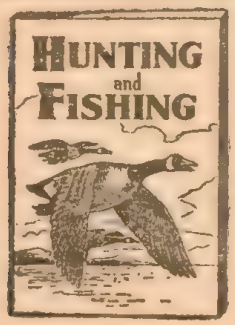

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seemed to open up and let loose the elements of volcanic fury. Down from the hillsides, up through the valleys, that dreadful torrent of Indian cruelty and massacre poured around the little squad to swallow it up with one grand swoop of fire. But Custer was there at the head, like Spartacus fighting the legions about him, tall, graceful, brave as a lion at bay, and with thunderbolts in each hand. His followers formed a hollow square, and met the rush, and roar and fury of the demons.

There is no doubt but that Custer time and time again gazed through the powdersmoke over the boiling sea of fury around him, looking for signs of the coming of Reno and Benteen, but they never came.

Hour after hour passed and yet no friendly sign of Reno's coming; nothing to be seen save battle smoke, streaks of fire splitting through the misty clouds, blood flowing in rivulets under tramping feet, dying comrades and Indians swarming about him.

That canvas destroyed by fire at Fort Bliss was only an artist's conception of what took place, but we can vision that we see him still standing as the fight continues with unabated fury until late in the afternoon. Men have sunk down beside their gallant leader until there are but a handful left.

The charm of his life is broken, for Custer has fallen, a bullet cleaves a pathway through his side, and as he falters another strikes his noble breast. Like a strong oak stricken by lightning's bolt, shivering the mighty trunk and bending its withering branches down close to earth, he is the last to succumb to death, his death leaving him forever a hero in the minds, hearts and history of American people, and his bravery admired even by those Indians who brought about his death. *Adios!*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

CONFLICT between cattlemen and lumberjacks rages in THE BATTLE OF MILE HIGH the action-packed Wayne Morgan novel by Chuck Martin in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN.

Frank Fenton, young boss of the Two F outfit, and Jay Coster, owner of the Lone Star, are rounding up cattle in the timbered slopes of the Mile High mountain country when they sense trouble.

"Sounds to me like Clark Bainbridge and his choppers are gettin' mighty close to our Wedge," the old cowman says.

Frank Fenton nods and instinctively pats the stock of a rifle in a saddle-scabbard under his left leg. Before he can frame an answer, a loud ringing call far down the slope gives the age-old warning of the lumberman.

"Timber-r-r-r-!"

The two cattlemen jerk up in their saddles in that half moment of hushed silence which always precedes the fall of a forest monarch. Then they hear an ominous crackling, a hissing rush of air, and the splintering of small trees as a huge Douglas fir crashes earthward.

There is an angry murmur as the branches of the big tree slither down through the thick underbrush. Then the frightened bellowing of cattle shatters the rarefied air as terrified animals stampede through the forest aisles seeking escape.

Old Jay Coster throws back his shaggy white head and sends a shrill Texas yell ringing through the confusion of noises. Wide-shouldered cowboys mounted on deep-chested mountain horses race out from the timber from every direction, and each man has his rifle ready for war.

"Tree-hogs in the Wedge!" Frank Fenton shouts to the grim-faced cowboys. "Ride in pairs and follow me, you cowhands. We'll settle this with Bainbridge once and for all!"

Fenton's big bay horse leaps forward under the nudge of a blunted spur, and old Jay Coster is right behind the Two F boss when Fenton slides his horse to a stop at the splintered base of a huge green stump.

"Howdy, cowboy," a deep insolent voice greets Fenton. "We were expecting you and your body-guard to come through the timber."

Fenton glares at the speaker—a tall man with a handsome clean-shaven face. Several burly lumberjacks stand behind their boss with deadly razor-honed axes in their brown calloused hands. Cowboys crowd up behind Fenton and Coster, staring at the choppers with fright written plainly on their rugged features.

"I figgered yuh'd be here, Clark Bain-

[*Turn page*]

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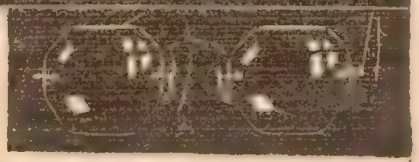

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bridge," Fenton says coldly, and he makes no attempt to conceal his anger. "You and yore jacks are trespassing on private land, and I'm givin' yuh a chance to drag yore ropes."

"The Lord of all Creation speaks," Bainbridge says with a chuckle, but his right hand is close to a six-shooter on his right hip. "Now you listen to me, cow feller," he tells Fenton, as the smile leaves his face. "This Wedge belongs to the Bainbridge Lumber Company, and I'm giving you two days to clear your cattle out of the timber!"

"Hog-wash, you blasted Pilgrim!"

Jay Coster urges his horse up a step as he takes the play away from Fenton. The old Texan's cowhorn mustaches twitch angrily as he glares at Bainbridge, but the boss of the lumberjacks smiles coldly and shrugs a shoulder.

"Me and Frank's daddy bought this here Wedge before you and Frank was foaled," Coster declares positively. "The boundary is over there on West Fork, and the piece runs clear over here to East Fork."

"You've got the boundaries right, but in the wrong titles," Bainbridge answers quietly. "My father and his brother bought this piece of timber when land was selling for a dollar an acre. I've warned you cow nurses many's the time, and I just figure that time was wasting. I aim to cut the Wedge, and you've got two days to clear your stock out of my timber!"

Bainbridge glances at Frank Fenton and smoothly draws the gun from his holster. Three cowboys trigger back their guns to cover the lumberman and his crew. Jay Coster stoops his thin shoulders with his right hand shadowing the .45 tied low on his right leg, but the low even voice of Frank Fenton eases the tension of taut muscles, and hair-trigger tempers.

"You said you were waiting for us, and now yuh back up this bushwhack game with a sneak play, Bainbridge," Fenton says. "I had a hunch you'd have an Ace-in-the-hole, so I rigged up my own. Don't crowd yore luck, wood-chopper. Take a look up behind me where that deadfall blocks the trail. Three cowboys are forted up behind that old tree, and every one of them has a rifle coverin' yore treacherous heart."

"I coppered my own bet," Clark Bainbridge says. "See that nest of rocks yonder behind me? Two of my men are squinting down their Winchesters with the muzzles trained on you and that old Texan. When I give the high-sign or speak the right word—"

"It's a tie the way I see it," Frank Fenton says slowly. "I didn't expect anythin' better than a tie in this go-round."

"By Dogies, I'll bust that tie," Jay Coster

says hoarsely. "A man can't die but one time, and I've lived most of mine. It's different with you, Bainbridge. You ain't but twenty-eight or nine—a couple of years older than Frank. Call off yore heel-dogs or I'll give a sign of my own!"

Frank Fenton holds his breath and stares at Bainbridge. The slightest movement will start guns roaring, and the sun-drenched California hills will run red with blood. Jay Coster straightens proudly in his worn saddle and takes a deep breath. When he speaks, the Modoc County war will begin with sudden death!

"Don't shoot, men!" A clear voice warns coldly. "We have both sides covered!"

Fenton turns to stare at a tall man who sits in the saddle of a big black stallion atop a little ridge. The stranger wears a long black cape, a black silk mask covers the upper part of his face, and a pair of black-butted six-guns fit into the horseman's hands as though they are part of him.

"It's the Masked Rider!" Bainbridge exclaims. "Never heard of him being in these parts before, but I'm drawing back my ante. Him and his Indian pard, Blue Hawk, have the drop on all of us, and both are dead shots!"

[*Turn page*]

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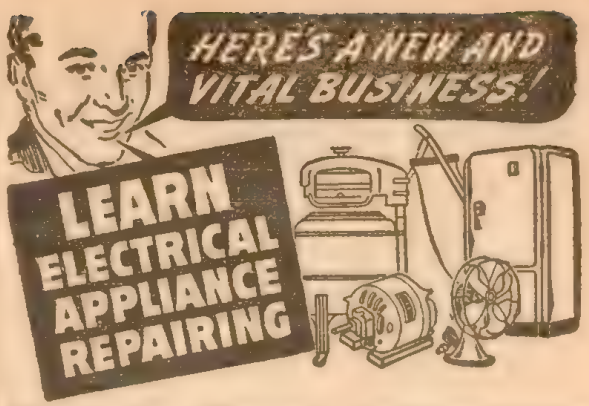

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And that is the way that the Masked Rider enters into the trouble between the cattlemen and the boss of the lumber company. There is suspense and action all the way through this exciting yarn as Wayne Morgan and his Yaqui companion battle their foes and seek to bring peace to the mountain country. THE BATTLE OF MILE HIGH, by Chuck Martin is a novel that packs plenty of thrills, a colorful yarn that you will enjoy from beginning to end!

There will also be an excellent selection of shorter Western yarns in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN, all of them filled with the drama and conflict of the cattle country. Plenty of good reading for everyone!

OUR LETTER BOX

WHICH stories did you like best in this and other issues of MASKED RIDER WESTERN? We value your opinions, ideas and suggestions—so let's hear from more of our readers! Your letters and postcards help us to plan future issues.

Since there are so many letters this time, we are only able to quote brief excerpts from a few of them. We are grateful to all of you for writing and for your interest in MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Now the readers take over:

I have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for over a year and I enjoy every issue. Keep love out of it, but I would like to have you show the Masked Rider's background and why he is fighting crime.

—*Donald Fassbender, Appleton, Minn.*

Although I have not read many Masked Rider stories I think Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk are swell. It would be better if the stories were longer. Let the Masked Rider stay as he is, but let him tell his real name and where he came from originally.

—*Edna White, Stockton, California.*

I like the *Masked Rider Western* better than I do any other Western magazine. All the stories are okay with me.

—*Joseph Waring, Douglassville, Ill.*

Of all Western magazines I like MASKED RIDER WESTERN the best. My favorite story was DEATH IN THE SADDLE, by Hascal Giles.

—*James Anderson, Windner, Ark.*

I have just finished LONGHORN RAILS. It was good, but please let Wayne Morgan do some courting. I think it would be better to give Blue Hawk a bigger part in the stories.

—*Elmer Johnson, Ann Arbor, Mich.*

I have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for some time. But I agree with the reader who felt that it would be better if the Masked Rider had something of a love affair sometime, as it would make the stories more interesting.

—*Leen Hanks, Sardis, Miss.*

I have just completed reading another MASKED RIDER WESTERN and I think it is the best Western

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book I have ever read. I have read a good many of the Masked Rider stories and like them fine. I agree with Miss White of Oak Ridge, Tenn. I don't want the Masked Rider in any love affair. But I think Blue Hawk should be in the fighting a little more.

—Clinton Eakins, Robards, Kentucky.

My father, sister and I have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for four years and we think it is swell, but we would like to know how and why he became the famous Masked Rider. I read that many people want the Masked Rider to fall in love but I don't believe he should because of the following reasons: 1. He would always have to go to see her and this would interrupt his actions. 2. If he didn't have a girl, he wouldn't have to tell her his identity and could ride the range without worry. 3. He wouldn't represent such a dramatic figure because he would be like any other cowboy. So please keep the Masked Rider a free riding Robin Hood.

—Dorothy Cuteri, Struthers, Ohio.

That's all for this time—but there will be more quotes from your letters next issue—and let's hear from more of our readers. Please address all your letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. See you all next issue. Thanks—and so long!

—THE EDITOR.

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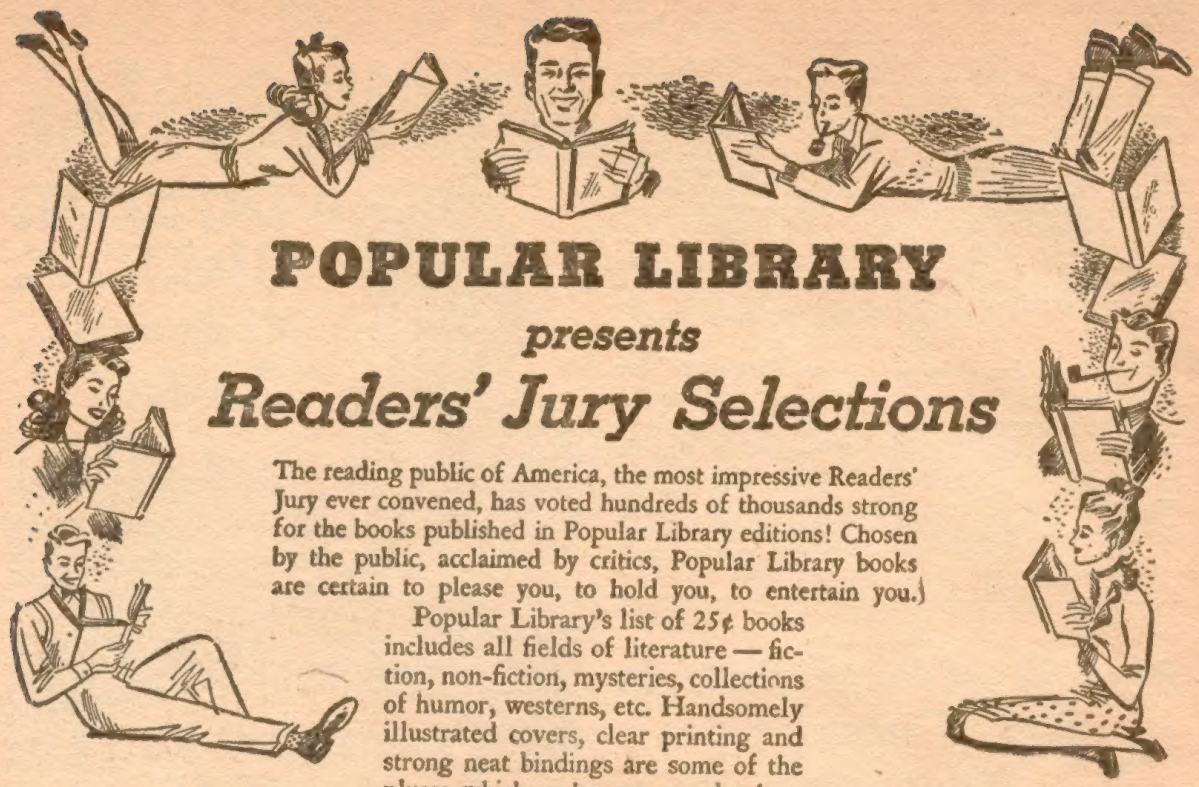

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Benefits THAT ARE BIG ENOUGH To Be WORTHWHILE!

IF YOU'RE INJURED accidentally and unable to work, policy provides disability benefits, according to type of accident and injury, for periods up to 24 months, varying in amount from .... $30 to $100.00* PER MO.

IF YOU'RE SICK and unable to work, policy provides disability benefits, according to type of illness, for periods up to 3 months, varying in amount from .... $20 to $100.00* PER MO.

For ACCIDENTAL DEATH or INJURY policy provides cash benefits in varying amounts, according to type of accident and injury sustained, from ..... $200 to $4000*

PLUS *HOSPITALIZATION* PLAN

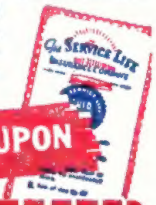
Hospital Benefits are in addition to disability benefits, subject to terms of policy, and cover both sickness and accident. They include $5 per day for hospital room for 30 days in any one policy year . . .PLUS up to $85 for various specified hospital expenses, such as X-Ray, Oxygen Tent, Laboratory Fees, Drugs, Dressings and Ambulance. MATERNITY, limited to $50.00, effective after policy is in force for 10 months.

These are the "highlights" of the policy. For full details, write for the policy itself!

THE SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
773-H SERVICE LIFE BUILDING OMAHA 2, NEBRASKA

POLICY SENT FREE! *NO COST!*

NO OBLIGATION! . . .*Remember, all we can give you here are the highlights of the policy. All are subject to policy provisions. Send for the policy itself. Read it for specific benefits, limitations, exclusions and reduced benefits over age 60. You'll agree this policy offers really *substantial* protection at *minimum* cost. Let us send you this policy for 10 DAYS' FREE EXAMINATION. No salesman will call. Just mail coupon below.



FREE 10-DAY INSPECTION COUPON

The SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE CO.
773-H Service Life Bldg., Omaha 2, Nebraska

SEND without cost or obligation your "Gold Seal" $1-A-MONTH Policy for 10 Days' Free Inspection.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....AGE.....

CITY.....STATE.....

BENEFICIARY.....